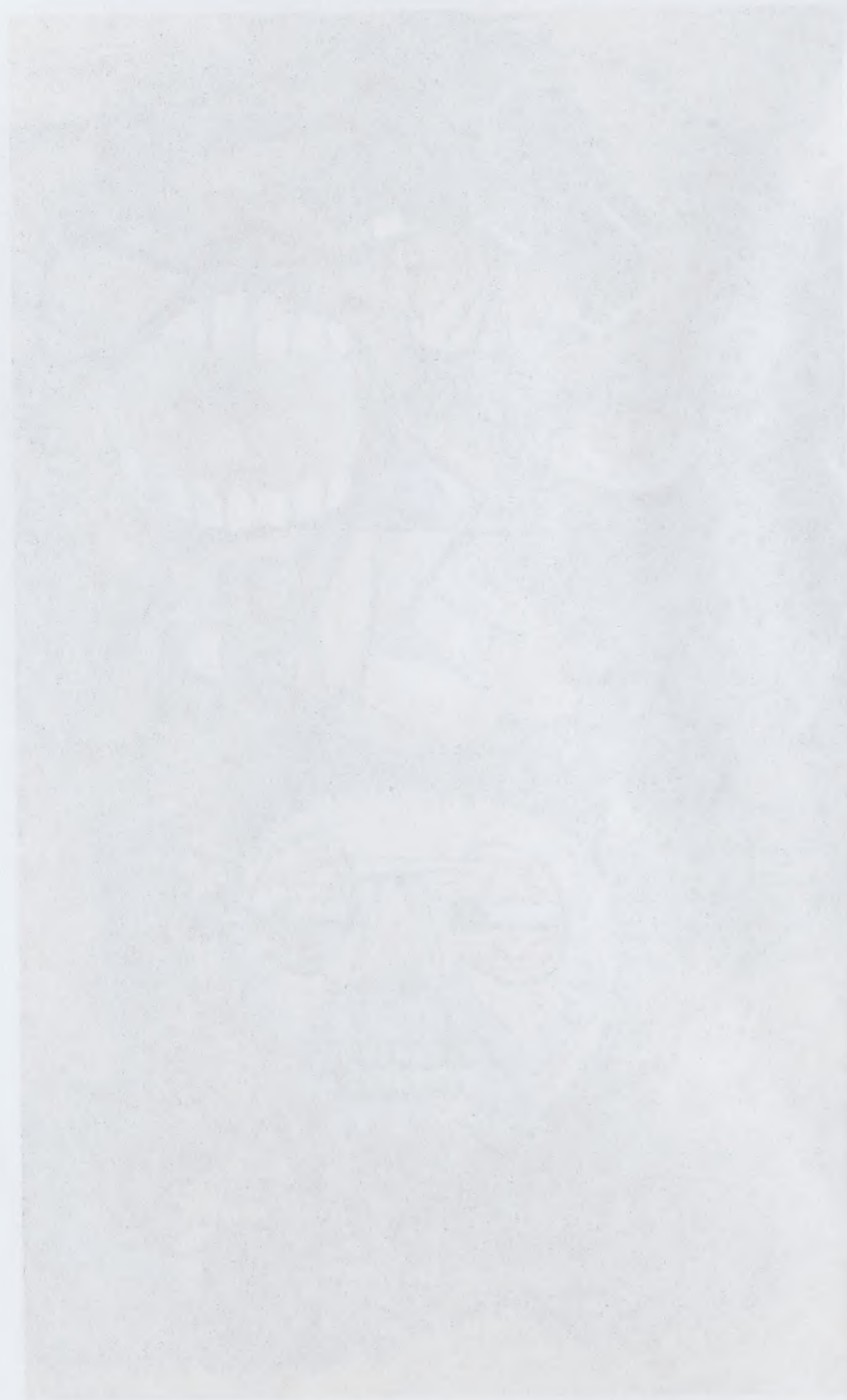


arden 2015









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CARSON McCULLERS LITERARY AWARD WINNERS

The Brick Road Greear Prize for Poetry

Rotten Fruit by Hayley Maine, Armuchee High School

In the Savage City by Jeremy Andrews, Columbus State University

The Orlene Jones Poulsen Award for Fiction

Thank You for the Pictures by Elim Lee, Brookstone School

Tolerable Oranges by Alyssa Hudson, Columbus State University

The Paul Hackett Award for Creative Nonfiction

Mother, Did You? Know by Elim Lee, Brookstone School

Motherland by Alyssa Hudson, Columbus State University

Naartjie Multimedia Award for Expository Writing

Mark Doty and Transforming Experience into Art by Christopher Delano, Columbus State University

KOCIAN WINNERS 2015

Poetry

The Wine by Christopher Delano

Fiction

The Worst Trip Home by Kenneth Campbell

Creative Nonfiction

Escape These Southern Bones by Jeremy Andrew

Art

Brooklyn by Lindsay Marchello

EDITOR'S NOTE

I tried to strip the writer from me, took her out back and flogged her until she agreed to leave me alone. After six years of honing my craft, I attempted to put the good bitch down, may she rest in peace, but I failed. Failure burns up my cheeks even now. I have wanted to write since I was a kid, twelve, to be exact. My first office space I created with one of our old computers and rolling desk, and there I let words slay me. I stopped going to slumber parties, quit sports, and spent more time at the library. My stories became the existence I needed, I wanted.

Then I was shoved off the plank into reality. I'm only a kid and these words couldn't possibly mean anything to anyone. One day I'll want kids of my own and a house and words can't keep a stomach full. So I wrung her out, kicked her low. She ran in circles inside me, hid when she was afraid maybe this time, I would win. But she refused to give up.

Two years I have lost, that I could have used to lock my door, to figure out what my voice wants to say. But it is also two years of learning. Not only about myself, but about others. I joined different groups of people, watched them hurdle their challenges at full speed and clear them. Two years to realize my voice needed a moment to rest. She needed time outside the page, to fail at words, to live in the places she feared most.

The words wouldn't quit banging their foreheads into my skull, so I couldn't refuse them. I couldn't refuse myself becoming whole again, realizing when I flip through a collection of poems, I often pick up the lost things I've shoved so far down and put them back in place. That is all I could ever ask for. Most of what helped me regain my footing came from creating this journal. It reminded me what it means to be an artist, of what it takes, and how it affects others. I'm so grateful for the opportunity, for my staff, my contributors, and the experience. Now the *Arden 2015* belongs to you, in whatever form you need.

Samantha Alliston
Editor-in-Chief

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Conflicts, however simple or complex, are not enough. When you put a man's knee in a vice, he'll stay strong and silent until you let him feel that first twist of tension that grips his sensitive joint. Twist again and he'll begin to sweat. Twist once more and his jaw clenches painfully, almost painfully enough to distract him from the crushing of his knee. He will speak. He will tell every secret he knows--and quite a few more.

ARDEN XVII

COFFEE IS BREWING BY EDNA ROBINSON

The cold wooden floorboards make indentations
On the skin of my shoulder blades
While the sponge textured ceiling plays tricks
On my overly focused eyes letting me peek at
All the faces and
Creatures that appear to reside there.
Shafts of the sun's light stretches over
My ribs and warms them each respectively.
From down here I see bits of food and plastic wrappers
I've dropped while cooking that have made
A new home underneath the refrigerator.
The air is cool and crisp on this winter morning
Ready for coffee to warm my hollow bones.



ARDEN XVII

HEMINGWAY'S LAST KISS BY BRANDON HODGES

On this cold April morning
Hemingway is the master of his fate.
With the weight of diseased blood
eroding his body
clouding his mind
he will meet death just like his father did,
his brother did,
granddaughter will.
He makes his way to the basement.
A man full of mettle but no iron,
finds his prized Boss shotgun.
He strokes the parallel barrels,
grabs a couple of shells.
One for the burden of his genius,
the other to purge hallucinations.
With his manhood in hand he ascends the stairs.
Now his eyes embrace the Sun Valley home.
His mouth drops, freeing
like an automaton in movement.
What comes next is natural to him.
"It has been too long, my love, but I'm here."
A final thought before he climaxes.

Early December 2002

I grip tighter to the hand I'm holding as I'm jostled by various bags and packages. I turn my face to the hand, follow the arm up, and over the shoulder to the dark haired man whose face I know so well. We stop at the jewelry counter and only then am I released from his grip. Hazel eyes, so like my own, meet mine.

"You can look, but don't go too far." The voice is strict and deep, but charming and the woman at the counter gives a quiet "aww."

"Is this your daughter?" She asks, and her mood seems to brighten at the sight of a father and daughter shopping together.

"Yes. Say hello."

"Hello." My voice is soft, but not shy, and I meet the woman's gaze with open curiosity, my hair swaying as my head tilts. She smiles at me in return, offers some candy from a bowl, and I glance to my father. He nods and I take it. "Thank you."

The two of them start talking business and I move away, browsing the glass countertops and marveling at all the glittering pieces of jewelry. This section has diamonds and I glance back at the section my father is in. Green. Must be emerald, I think to myself. I have no interest in emeralds, and instead, I search for the dark blue stone that belongs to me. There! I slide further away, eyes full of the beautiful blue stone, admiring the light in the cut. Sapphire for September. For me.

"Brandy!" I jerk away from the counter in surprise, head and body turning, moving automatically back toward the voice.

"I'm here." Like that, I'm back at my father's side. He has two rings in front of him, both emerald stones with gold bands, set in two different styles. One is blocky, like a barrel, but the other is long, the stone cut like a diamond and my eyes are drawn to it. How pretty that would look on my mom!

"Brandy, which one of these do you think your mom will like?" I don't even need to think about the question. I reach out and point toward the one cut like a diamond.

"That one! Mom says rings like that look good on our hands because we have long, thin fingers." He laughs, both to himself and to the sales woman, and motions to both rings.

"I'll take them both, gift wrapped."

"Very good, Sir." She packs them into two cute, little boxes, and I look at my father.

"Both?"

"Yes." He doesn't expand, and I know better than to ask again. It won't do any good. When the woman passes him the boxes he takes them and holds out his free hand to me. As we walk away from the counter, heading to the exit, my eyes slide past him, to the bag with the curving logo on it, and I smile to myself. What a pretty ring.

Christmas Day 2002

We're up early this Christmas, because dad has to leave for work. I don't really understand why. My mom is confused, but still pleasant as she sits on one end of the couch, my father on the other. I'm on the floor. It's my job to pass out the presents.

We're opening presents and I'm excited. I've received three new books, a new CD, and several outfits that my mom and I shopped for not too long ago. Even so, my eyes are watching my mom as she goes through her small pile. I want to watch her face when she finds the ring.

"Thanks, baby." My father says, leaning over to kiss my mom and I make a face. He laughs at me, "What?"

"Nothing." I turn my head, nose in the air, and they're both laughing at me. My mom continues going through her pile, the last to finish. She's gotten new pajama bottoms and a nice blouse, a pair of earrings that I found for her, and some cleaning supplies. I blink.

"Thank you, both. I love my earrings." She kisses my father and holds her arms out to me. I move into them.

"Merry Christmas!" I say, and we echo it at each other for a few moments, laughing before my father gets up to leave. We wave good-bye, and my mom starts clearing the torn wrapping paper. I sit still, stunned for a moment then turn, helping her gather the paper. "Momma?" Something stirs in my mind, an uneasy, unsettled feeling that spreads.

"Yes?" I can't find the words to answer her. The uneasy feeling tells me to stop, but I can't.

"What is it?" She asks, turning to face me. I find it hard to look at her.

"...Did daddy give you an emerald ring?" My eyes widen a little as an expression I've never seen crosses my mother's face. Her eyes waver and I know I never want to put a name to the emotion I see in her at that moment. That's my answer; we stay like that, her withstanding some great force, and I bowed against it.

December 27th 2002

Dad and I are driving to Alabama to see his friend. We bought her a Christmas gift when we went shopping. An Auburn snow globe, because I like snow globes and she likes Auburn. We have a small gift for her son as well, but the drive to her house always takes forever. My father and I don't talk much on the way there. We never talk; he doesn't know what to ask and I don't know what to tell him. When we arrive, Lisa comes out, light blond hair curling the way it does and her eyes crinkling at the corners as she greets us.

"Merry Christmas!" She says, hugging first my father, then me. She leads us inside, though by now we're both familiar with her home. Troy is on the floor, waiting for us and I smile at him.

"Hi!"

"Hey." He says, but he's smiling too and I join him next to the Christmas tree I helped build. Troy's parents are divorced, and I wonder what it must be like to have divorced parents. Mine are happily married. My dad passes out the gifts we brought for Troy and Lisa, and she passes a gift to my dad and then a couple small ones to me.

"Thank you," I say, reaching for them, and I find myself blinking in surprise. I bring the gifts to my lap, my eyes mesmerized by the glinting of light off her finger. "Oh."

Lisa looks confused for a moment then follows my gaze to her hand. Her expression shifts to one of pleasure, a light pink color in her cheeks as she holds her hand out to me. There, on her finger, is a beautiful diamond cut emerald in a gold band. My eyes take in the dark color and the dancing light, stunned. "Your dad got it for me." She says it, and I can hear the happy affection in her voice while I sit there. I can't bring myself to look at my father, or at her, or at Troy and it feels like forever passes me by, passes me by as a realization settles into my being. I'm not sure I want to know the name of the sudden darkness that grips my heart.

"It's pretty." I say, still unable to look at any of them.

ARDEN XVII

SERVANT STAIRCASE BY JENNA BERRY



It was my second night in Galway City, Ireland. The allure of the city's nightlife began to take its hold on me. It was cold that night, but I remember the warmth of the screwdrivers I tossed back at the Black Rose bar running through me. I mean other than the Vodka and OJ coursing through my veins a brother had to find a place to keep warm. I'm grown, smooth, and pretty cool so why wouldn't I be able to do this? And plus I already had my lady's permission. So I said "Fuck it, let's do the damn thing." So we cross the slick, hard, cobblestone street and make our way to our destination.

There was Le Paradise Club. We walk up, pay the bouncer our ten euro, and we swagger on in. Damn! I think as I look at the sight before me. There are dozens of sweaty Irishmen and only four strippers to go around. Sean is the first to break the silence as he eloquently states in his mixed southern and Jersey drawl: "What the fuck is this?" I'm wondering that my damn self as I walk to the bar. "Shit I ain't much of a drinking man but I gotta take the edge off" I thought. Before I can even order my drink the disgruntled Irish gentleman to my right screams: "Strip Club! This is a fucking lap dance club, these girls aren't dancing to shite."

"Shit at least he said it," I thought. Then there was a tap on my shoulder.

I turn and see a tall, bronze skinned, voluptuous figure. I mean this was the kind of woman who you can only describe with the word damn! Long black hair and bells on her heels and mini skirt, curves upon curves: she is dressed for attention and I damn sure noticed. She asks me with an accent that I can only describe as Eastern European "You want a table dance?" Now earlier I would've laughed at the thought of me paying for a dance when I have a woman at home and no money to blow, but this damn city had its holds on me.

So I muster up in as deep and cool a voice possible, "Sure let me think about it."

Only for her to respond ten seconds later with a sexy, "Thought about it yet?" That's when she got me.

In a span of five minutes I was emptying my wallet and counting all my change trying to reach forty euros for a table dance. Sean (who was nowhere to be found) finally emerged from the back room with his new friend trying to act cool. "Humph, at least I'm not the only one getting screwed." But funny thing is my mind knew this was a waste but something came over me. After dropping all of my pride and remaining change on the bar top, she grabs me by the hand and with a sly sexy voice says, "Come on, baby," as she leads me to the back room where I sit with the lights down low as my Eastern European seductress sashays towards me.

The music changes and her body is moving to the rhythm. Her body is coinciding with the lyrics as she pulls her thong to the side: a glimpse of temptation. She teases the no touching policy as she plants one stiletto wearing foot on my shoulder and pulls her body towards me. Her top is gone now and the music is fading out. Her body mesmerizes me but I know nothing about this woman. She is nameless

with a dynamic figure. There goes her thong. She is naked and shimmering, but I am the one who feels weak and exposed. She is walking towards me. I'm losing my cool. Gone was the man who thought himself smooth and cool enough to hang in this place. Left is the romantic who wonders, "What are your hopes and dreams? Is any of this real? What am I doing here? There is a coldness shooting down my spine. I awaken and her trance is gone. She kisses me on the cheek and wishes me a good night as she helps me up. My money is gone and her attention is turned elsewhere. And just like that I'm walking out with the lights and music fading behind me. The bouncer nods and lets me out as I walk into Galway City center broke, cold, and confused.

Knowing that you lost yourself is a hell of a realization. Especially when you notice that you gave into the stereotypes and the liquor. The cold wind clings to my skin as I walk alone to my hostel. Past the glitz, glamour, and pub-crawls, all I have now is an empty wallet and hostel walls. Maybe I am a part of the stereotypes of ballers and shot callers. Maybe this is what it means to have my blood and be this hue. I climb the stairs and fumble for my key as I work to get these thoughts out of my head. How could I claim feminism when I just gave into a tired trope? The cold sheets of my window-facing bunk greet me as I continue to sober up. Do I brag about this experience in a twisted tale of misogyny and bravado? I could save face and cling to my beliefs. Or maybe despite what I do or how learned I've become, at the core of my being I'm just a guy.

You turned the red wine back to blood and drank it.
Together we bathed in the stock of our father's stash,
Filled our folds with it and made our flesh flush—

We were newborn and screaming. We were drunk
On communion. I was grasping but slipping on you,
Hungry for wafers of you. This moment was sacrosanct

To me, and also unto you—this moment was an offering.
I cupped my hands, filled them, too, and drank deep
The blood of my Christ. I drank deep the blood of you.

We stamped the grapes deep purple and red and wrung
Our life's blood out of our gauze wrapped feet, soon
Red faced, fever eyed, grappling in the fermentation

Until we fell, clutching our bellies, turning purple.
The red berries turned rancid over our heads, it ran
In ribbons over our bodies and stained them in veins

Like branches of a vineyard, somewhere in Eden,
And a serpent, coiled around our twisting bodies
Whispering, whispering, whispering: "Drink up."

ARDEN XVII

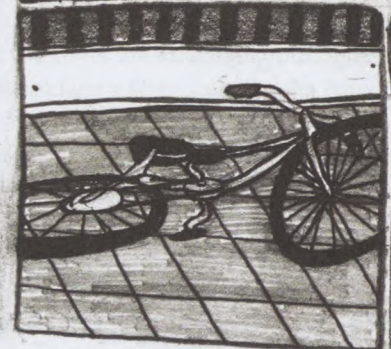
THE HANGOVER BY CHRISTOPHER DELANO

With my head plunging towards the toilet
And the heavy weight of sins pushing down
On my shoulders, my neck, my gag reflex,
I'm thinking about that wooden cross of yours,
The one always floating above bedroom doors
In every home you've ever lived in.

You decoupage it as a child in many colors
Of pastel tissue paper, like springtime
Tortoise shells. I'm dirtying the basin
With the violent reminders of tonight's mistake,
All brown and earth tones, beastly colors.
The cross is hanging in my head now, I think.

The toilet water is blessed, isn't it?
Like a baptismal font, taking in my sin
So the beast in my belly will be cleaned,
And your cross is all pastoral and pastel,
Shepherding out my sins, cleansing them.
I'm on my knees under the weight of it all.

AFTER THE CALL



JJARRETT

ARDEN XVII

FLOWER GIRL BY LEILAND ARNHOLT

You gave me glass pieces
said you wanted to see what
I would make
so I glued them together
with blood,
made them into stained glass roses
and stitched my fingers
together with the strings
spilling out of
your hourglass lying
under the coffee table
like you kicked
it out of sight and out
of your mind
like the pieces of glass
in my veins that
color me from the inside
just so that you
would smile at me once
as if I were more than a simple
pick-me-up to go with
your nightly beer.

Picking your hairs off my favorite blue shirt
While you stand outside in your underwear to smoke.
I'm getting my bags ready, haven't told anyone,
Not yet, not even you, because you're scared of burns
Even though you smoke. So, I'm sure you can deal
With the loss of me just like the coming rain.

The last time we were together, it didn't rain
For months and the ground cracked like your shirt—
The one with too much starch you got for a deal
That I still think wasn't so great, but money's smoke
When you're so rich. You just watch it burn
Between your lips, as if you could be anyone.

We were together and I could've been anyone
And still I couldn't have pleased you. There's rain,
Too, and soft silk sheets, so much time to burn
With trips to bars and drinks to spill on your shirt.
I'm packing my clothes that smell of cigarette smoke
Because you smoke inside, even though our deal

I gave up gin and you agreed to learn to deal
With smoking on the porch. I can't blame anyone
But myself for the time I've breathed your smoke
Or the times I've waited at your door in the rain
For you to let me in, soaking through my shirt
And catching a fever that stayed a while, left burns.

How many times must I tell you that now it burns
When you kiss me? We play these cards and you deal
Every time and I always lose the hand, and my shirt.
You take off and play your games with almost anyone:
They always lose their shirts and you dance in the rain
Of their money, watch their lives go up in smoke.

But now you're in your underwear, having a smoke
And I set myself on fire. I'm going to burn
Away the bridges, drive myself fast through the rain.
I'll call at the airport and we make a new deal:

I leave forever so you can be just like anyone
Else and you could be decent and mail my shirt.

My blue shirt smells like smoke,
But like anyone else, you'll burn
And you'll deal with the rain.

Haley could hear her husband, Travis, walking down the hallway, floorboards creaking underneath his weight. She was in the master bedroom, a room she had avoided the last couple of months. Boxes littered the area—some half-full, some empty. Clothes, dirty and clean, scattered the floor, and the bed had not been changed in weeks. Travis pushed open the heavy, oak door with his foot while scrubbing his hair dry with a towel. All he wore was a pair of plaid boxer briefs, causing Haley's cheeks to flush with embarrassment. She saw his eyes widen when he noticed her standing by the edge of their bed, holding a roll of packing tape.

"What's up?" Travis mumbled as he pushed past Haley towards a pile of clothes that had been accumulating underneath the window. He began riffling through the scattered articles of clothing, smelling various shirts to find the cleanest one.

"Just packing some stuff up." Haley reached out and stroked the short fur on the back of their Boxer, Abram, who lay asleep at the foot of the bed.

"You've been packing for the past eight weeks. When are we actually doing this thing?" Travis kept his back to Haley and pulled on a pair of wrinkled jeans to match the wrinkled white t-shirt he found.

"I told you I was working on it." Haley smoothed her clothes, a nervous habit.

"Well, hurry up. It can't be that hard to find your own place." With Abram following, Travis exited the room, and Haley heard them stomp down the stairs. Travis was mad, just like he had been for the last two months after Haley confessed to being unfaithful to him.

Haley waited until she couldn't hear Travis' footsteps anymore. When the noise ceased, she slowly crept down the stairs, peering around the corner to make sure that he wasn't there. Being quiet was difficult because everything in the house was made of creaking and cracking wood. Travis and Haley had inherited Travis' parents' house when they decided they were too old to take care of the land. The house was a historic, plantation home that sat on three thousand acres of South Georgia land, which had been in Travis' family since its establishment. Except now, instead of growing sugar cane like they did in the nineteenth century, Travis' family had devoted most of the land to pecan trees.

Haley realized that she had stopped at the foot of the stairs, just like she had so many times before. There stood a small end table filled with individually framed photographs. Lined up in order, each photograph showed every generation of the family as they inherited the house. All the families stood on the unchanging front porch in every photo, always providing Haley with a sense of comfort. She used to love to stop and stare at these photos, but in this moment it just made her sad. A few weeks prior, Travis had taken the photo of them and lay it face down on the table. It remained that way, for Haley didn't have the heart to prop it back up.

Haley was brought out of her trance when Abram started to bark near the screen door. She walked over to see if there was anything in their garden. Usually, when Abram barked like this, there was a deer or even a feral hog that had made its way to their small vegetable garden near the back patio. There was nothing to be seen so Haley opened the door and let Abram run free.

Haley and Travis rescued Abram three years prior, right after they moved into the house. He was weak from starvation when Travis found him amongst the rows of pecan trees one winter night. Though the dog didn't have a collar, it was determined that a neighbor, who had recently moved, must have abandoned him. Travis carried him all the way to the house where Haley nursed him back to health. Ever since then Abram, named after the kind of tank Travis drove in the Army, had become a permanent part of their small family.

Haley walked to the freezer to pull out some frozen chicken to thaw for dinner. She paused when trying to decide if she should pull out one piece for herself or two for her and Travis. Pulling out one piece, she slammed the door shut and threw the bagged chicken in the sink out of frustration. Her pocket vibrated as her phone informed her of an incoming text message. She leaned against the kitchen counter, bare feet sticking to the cool tile. Pulling on the bottoms of her jean shorts, which kept bunching up, she sighed when she saw that the text was from James, Travis' former best friend.

"I've been thinking about you a lot lately..."

The words burned on the cracked screen of her iPhone, which had broken the day that Haley told Travis about the affair. He had demanded to read through James' text messages, throwing the phone against the concrete in the parking lot of the local Walmart when he had read enough. Haley shifted her weight and stuffed the iPhone back into her pocket without replying. She hated James, though she knew that she only had herself to blame for what happened.

Travis rounded the corner and into the kitchen and rolled his eyes when he saw Haley standing there. He opened the door to the fridge and pulled out a beer; he was drinking a lot more these days. Without saying a word, he went and stood by the screen door to watch Abram chase butterflies in the garden. He had stuffed the bottom of his jeans into his pair of hunting boots and strung a handgun in a holster around his waist—he was going to ride the property to make sure that there weren't any trespassers lurking around, as he did every day around sunset.

The setting sun reflected off of Travis' deep, olive-colored skin. His thick and wavy, chestnut-colored hair shone in the light, making him look like a god. Haley's knees weakened a little, maybe because she knew that she could never have him again, or maybe because he really was just that gorgeous. Travis slightly turned his head towards Haley, so she cleared her throat and looked away, even though they both knew that she had been stalling. Keeping his eyes on Haley,

Travis took a baseball cap off a hook by the door and slipped it on his head.

Suddenly, a loud yelp came from the garden. Haley shot a concerned glance towards Travis who had jerked his head back towards the door. He saw that Abram was sprinting towards the woods with what appeared to be a wild dog chasing after him.

"Oh, Christ." Travis let his beer slip from his hand and glass shattered on the tile. Without informing Haley of what he saw, he ran outside, with the screen door slamming behind him. Haley scrambled to grab her pair of tennis shoes by the door, being careful to not step in the pool of Coors Light and broken glass. She stumbled out the door to follow Travis.

"Travis, what happened?" Haley yelled, but he was already halfway to the barn where they kept an army of tractors and four-wheelers. She took off after him when she heard an engine start, but it was too late, he was already driving for the woods.

Without stopping to think, Haley ran into the barn and hopped on one of their older four-wheelers. It had been quite some time since she had driven a four-wheeler, so she carefully guided the vehicle out of the barn before she took off after Travis. The sun was rapidly setting and Haley worried about Abram when she noticed a thin stream of blood running down the trail.

Travis' four-wheeler was able to go a lot faster than Haley's, and she struggled to catch up to him. He expertly maneuvered the road where Haley didn't have as much experience. Suddenly, Travis veered to the right to avoid a large hole, but Haley didn't respond quickly enough. The left front tire of her four-wheeler went directly into the hole and knocked her off of the seat. Travis heard the crash and peered behind him. He immediately brought his four-wheeler to a stop and jumped off to run towards her.

"Jesus, are you okay?" He knelt down next to Haley, where she lay still, flat on her back.

"Dammit, Travis. What is that giant hole?" A pain shot through Haley's wrist when she tried to prop herself up. She winced, so Travis awkwardly placed his hand in the middle of her back to stabilize her. Small cuts and scrapes covered her forearms and legs.

"That's from when I dug up that tree stump last week. I didn't have enough dirt to fill it back in. I would have warned you, had I known that you were going to follow me."

"Of course I followed you, Travis. I heard Abram yelp, and I figured you were chasing after him." Haley pushed him away as she attempted to stand on her own. Travis tried to help her anyway, but he grabbed her hurt wrist, causing Haley to cry out in pain.

"Looks sprained, maybe broken." Travis took her wrist in his hand.

"It hurts, really bad." Haley was doing her best to not cry in front of him.

"Let's get you back to the house."

"What about Abram?"

"I can come back out and look for him." He started to lead her away.

"What about my four-wheeler?"

"That can wait until later too. I just think we should have a better look at this wrist first."

Travis walked Haley back to his four-wheeler. It was odd for Haley to feel his hands on her back and hips as he steadied her on the back seat of the vehicle. The black leather warmed the bottom of her thighs. Haley slid her arms around Travis' waist, holding her throbbing wrist. Travis cleared his throat as he started the engine and headed back towards the house. Haley was thankful that they had not traveled very far because with each bump, she was coming to the painful realization that she was going to have a lot of bruises show themselves in the morning.

Travis pulled right into the garden behind the kitchen. He cut off the engine and jumped off the seat. Haley turned so he could grab her around the waist and help her down. His foot slipped and both of them stumbled. Haley's chest bumped into his. She blushed, but Travis stepped away.

"Let's get you inside, I'll grab the first aid kit." He opened the kitchen door, letting Haley walk through first. Stepping around the spilled beer, she went into the kitchen and leaned against the counter, holding her wrist because she didn't know what else to do with it. Travis reentered the room, carrying the large white, metal first aid kit that they kept in the hall closet.

"You don't have to help me. Go find Abram," Haley protested.

"How do you suppose you will wrap a wrist by yourself?" Travis placed the kit on the counter and went to grab Haley's hips. At first she hesitated, but then she let him hoist her onto the counter. Without saying a word, Travis began to dig through the kit, taking out a cold compress, extra strength Tylenol, and an Ace bandage. Haley braced herself for the pain when Travis began to wrap her wrist, but to her surprise, his hands were quite gentle.

"Thanks." Haley said in half-astonishment when he was done.

"It's no big deal." Travis took out two Tylenol and placed them in Haley's good hand. He went to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of water. Screwing off the cap, he handed the water to her.

"But it is a big deal, Travis." Haley was looking down at her scraped knees. She brought her eyes up, and he was staring at her. In that moment, Haley felt like he was about to kiss her, but suddenly Abram was whining at the screen door. Travis leapt over to the door to let Abram in. He was limping, and Haley immediately noticed a bite mark on his hind leg.

Travis told Abram to lie down in the kitchen, and Haley handed him the first aid kit. She scooted herself off the counter and knelt down next to the injured dog. Softly, Haley stroked his head and told him he was okay while Travis inspected the wound. It reminded Haley of when they first brought Abram home. The three of them spent so many hours in the kitchen, picking ticks and fleas off of Abram's fur.

"Travis, can I say something?" Haley blurted out the words without even realizing it.

"What's up?" He kept his eyes on Abram, whose heavy pants had turned into a steady, rhythmic breathing. Travis was pressing a clean towel down on the bite wound, which seemed to be clotting.

"Well, I don't know how else to say this so I am just going to say it." With her index finger, Haley picked at the dried blood from the small scrapes on her knees. "I still love you. I made a stupid, awful, unforgiveable mistake, but I still love you. I don't expect you to forgive me, and if I had to spend the rest of my life making it up to you, I would. Please, don't go through with this divorce." Haley pursed her lips together and lifted her eyes to meet Travis'. He had a stern look in his eye.

"I don't forgive you," Travis said.

He motioned for Haley to take over holding down the towel. Haley waited for him to speak again, but he didn't. He stood up and headed towards the living room. As he passed by the foot of the stairs, he stopped and picked up the frame that displayed the photo of him and Haley. After staring at it for a moment, he placed the picture back in its original, propped-up position.

ARDEN XVII

I WANTED TO THANK YOU BY ANA MENDOZA

In the cracks
Of your calloused hands
I have found a cradle.

It is plain
It is passive
And at times imperfectly rough,

But it is mine.

And in those hands,
The ones unlike mine,

Soft, thin,
That have amounted
To nothing,

—The ones that are
Undeniably
The opposite of yours—

I have begun to see
That I can read to you
Without words.
That the intimacy between us,

The growing understanding,
Is a part of

Every fold,
Every fault,
Every single corner of my niche

That you have made for me
Without me asking

Without a word.

Of all the things I think I know,
And hope for,
This is what you've given me.

Shall I be tempted to shuck and jive,
or am I the one who reads and writes?
Both are elements of the hue of my skin.

Articulation could empower me
but indulging in my loves equates me
with the worst uncle: Mr. Tom.

I am the Brotherman who's torn.
Choosing Klimts and Poes over pimps and hoes.
Rhythm and blues instead of faith and pews,

My appearance betrays the essence of my soul
since both academia and unity leave me cold.

Brotherman, am I my brother's keeper?
The black-balled fist drives a knife into my back.

"Keep this nigger-boy running":
Don't worry, Ellison,
I'm invisible, too, my brother.

Shoo-wop Beedop
Yeah.

September 2014 – Age 22

Jay, one of the men I work with, climbs out of a brown tinged, large wheeled Ford F-150. He does the same routine every morning. As his scuffed boots touch the aged white lines sprayed into the asphalt, he reaches into his back right pocket, pulls out a round, tin can, and pinches off an inch of brown cancer. He stuffs it into the bottom left crease of his lip and saunters towards the cold warehouse. There is a forklift there, complete with frayed padding and bent metal that he sits upon like a throne because here, and only here, is he king. He rolls carelessly throughout the place, passing pallets like peasants, taking in the indifferences of his coworkers because he is above us all. As he pulls up next to the Yuengling section, where I wait patiently beside my cart, he starts at me with that curling southern drawl.

"Hey man how you doing? Didja have a good weekend?"

"Yeah I did man. How about you?"

I knew roughly what to expect next. "Hell yeah man. So it's me and my boy Hunter right, and he comes over to the house round 9:30 and he brings his girl and some of her friends. So we start drinkin' round eleven and I swear 'bout an hour later I'm fucked up. Damn fireball shit will burn your insides up. So any way, I take this one bitch into the back and I fuck the shit out of her. She had these big ole titties and the wettest pussy I'd ever seen. Half way through it I'm passed the fuck out. I wake up round twelve the next morning saran wrapped round the dog house in the back yard. So you know, just the usual Saturday night stuff."

Another riveting story. This was the part of the sad Monday morning tradition. Going around the warehouse and seeing whose weekend was the must fucked up. I never win this game. What followed next was also no surprise.

"How bout you man? Whatdja do this weekend?"

"Oh nothing much." I knew I would regret the words before they even left my lips. "I just worked on some more of my poetry for school. I'm working on a piece about Jack the Ripper."

"Goddamn, son I done told you don't nobody give a fuck about that faggot ass bull shit. The hell you spend all your time in front of some damn computer. Come out with us. Drink some whiskey. Get yourself some pussy. Don't nobody in here give a fuck bout your gay ass little poems."

I laugh it off and make some Auburn football jokes and a couple of bad incest puns but he doesn't get it. He brushes it off as me "just fuckin with him" and he continues on with his forklift duties. Mondays are the worst. Mondays are the days that make me know for sure I have to fight against the brattling bones inside of myself. I picture myself a forty-year-old man still coming to work in shorts and a shirt with a logo on the left breast. I know I'll never be Faulkner but if I'm to move beyond this forty-year-old vision of myself then I have to fight against the king of the forklifts, crushing us all with his southern charm and fireball whiskey.

May 2009 – Age 17

Our Southern God turned his back upon me the night I lost my virginity. My Caylor, my one saving grace in this deep fried world and my best friend, was lost in the same haze with me. The night in question was in itself, a redneck masterpiece. A hill of red Georgian clay lead down to a lake and a dock resting gently on the cool banks of Lake Martin. Her family's lake house was rural, the nearest neighbors were roughly two miles in any direction. We played all day under the tent of the pontoon boat, casting our rods for the small, shitty crappy to bite. I was so angry at myself. I was having fun when I knew I shouldn't be. I was playing into the world's view of me but she was there. That's all that really mattered. That night back at the house, we lay our backs against the wall next to the bed, practically on top of one another. Our seventeen-year-old hearts were pounding and our zippers ached of temptation we knew God wouldn't allow. The next thing we knew it was 2:38 AM. I woke up to her lips on my neck. Tonight would be the night, regardless of God or good sense. You could feel it in the air. Finally, nirvana.

"Is this all that it is?" I said trying to hide the sheer panic in my voice.

"Yeah I think so," she said as the tremble in her voice became almost tangible.

Then the movement starts. It's slow at first and gradually, as you discover the depths of what you have gotten yourself into, the world around you actually disappears for a while. Three feeble, five minute attempts and two hours, two red faced children looked into each other's eyes, falling asleep to the motto that this wouldn't change anything; we would be all right. Then the next morning reality set in.

"Oh my God. Did we really just do that last night?" the panic wasn't so subtle now. "How stupid could we be? What if you're pregnant?"

"I don't know," she said, her hand trembling, the straightening iron making the curls in her long brunette hair lopsided. "Just get ready for church. We have to go. My dad said be ready in five minutes."

Thirty minutes later we were sitting in a wooden swing by a lake, an outside church service. As the preacher droned on in the background, we rocked in silence, the quiet even worse than sheer screams of panic. This was the tipping point for my homeland and me. What was supposed to be the most memorable night of my life was gone, replaced by the charismatic sermon of Reverend something another and imagining the Bible on my shelf at home, the one with my name on it, burning straight through the floor on its way to hell because of my hypocrisy. The Southern Baptist Convention and all its disciples closed in on my psyche and I knew God would never forgive us. My culture's religion had told me my whole life to have sex before marriage was wrong. Brimstone and hellfire awaited me and now I would surely be swallowed up into the earth with the rest of my people, the ones who lived for Friday night Granger Football and the party next to the Callaway Mansion. As we sat there on that swing, the smell of her perfume tried its best to

calm my nerves; the way the water gleamed off her eyes lower my heart rate so my ventricles did not beat straight out of my chest. She was my angel, trying her best to save me but there was the God in his truck, the devil riding shotgun, dragging me down to an eternal tailgate straight in the depths of hell. Funny thing is, I would gladly traverse the swamps and backwoods of hades if she stayed strong beside me, guiding me away from the Reverend somethings of this world.

August 2007 – Age 16

The fall wouldn't kill me. That was my first thought as I stared off into the night. Atop the roof of my best friend's house sat the products of small Christian school upbringing, complete with acoustic guitars and assaulting laughter. There were only a few of us back then, the same ones that had grown up together their entire lives. At Brian's house, I knew which side of the floor to kick off my muddy shoes before entering the foyer. Jarred's house was the best place to see the stars by a campfire, breathing in smoldering pine and throwing back some Mountain Dew. All of these places I knew intimately, but none of them were as prominent in my mind as Matt's house, my best friend at the time and the cornerstone of our little group. He was the most prolific of us all, with his guitar in his hand, the same one he lead our Wednesday chapels with and the one that constantly called out for God and his perfect love. Everything was fine in their perfect world but mine was not.

"Jeremy who do you think will win the game tomorrow?" I snapped back from my faux suicidal dreams.

"I think Georgia will. Tebow is way overrated."

A couple of laughs and snarks later they were back on the SEC and whether or not we were going to beat Ballard at the big football game next week. I didn't care for these things. I tried to, really I did. I wish it would have been easy for me to assimilate with the ways of my people. See, I never really fit in with my friends and I think deep down they knew it as well as I did. I didn't act like they did, challenging their beliefs. I had never owned a pair of Georgia boots or any memorabilia about the Dukes of Hazard. They loved God and played hard, two of the most important southern boy's commandments on the tablets. I hated Brad Paisley and their Bass Pro Shops shirts; I disdained the flags on their trucks and the drawl in their throats. I was with them, but not one of them.

"Damn Matt that's so cool. I can't believe you were related to Jefferson Davis." My attention returned to their conversation.

"Yeah he was my great, great, great grandfather I think. At least that's what my Dad told me." He remarked, soaking in the adulation of his peers.

"Yeah it's pretty cool I think. Hey you guys wanna hear this song I'm working on for chapel? It's off the new David Crowder CD." I couldn't hold it in. I let out a reluctant, judgmental chuckle.

"What's up Jeremy? What's so funny?" Their gazes turned towards me.

"Nothing I uh, I was just thinking about how badly we are going to crush the fuck out of Ballard next week."

A fit of uproar and applause returned them to our monthly tradition, sitting on Matt's roof watching him pluck the strings to God's tunes. Looking back I was so naïve and out of my element it makes me laugh. There we all sat, the shifting and grinding of black shingles beneath us. I sat there and stared off in the blackness of the August trees, the crisp and browned leaves falling towards the earth. I wondered what the men saw on the fields of Chickamauga. Did they watch blood fall to the mud of the earth like the leaves from a tree? Perhaps Matt's ancestor sat at a table with his bonny lasses in their fine silk robes eating buttermilk cornbread, being careful not to get grease stains on their clothes. There was no football or love for these men as they wiped the brains and the blood of their fellow man from their faces. Did the slaves hear the strumming of a G chord as they lay in their tents with welts and cuts on their bodies, listening to debates of States' rights and waiting the impending doom of Jim Crow. Apparently, none of that mattered as we sat there on that roof while Matt, all in one breath, bragged about his ancestral violence and sang of God's love for us all. No, the fall would not kill me.

May 2006 – Age 15

My father is a Catch 22 for me. I know somewhere deep down inside he used to care for me, his first born son, yet the misery of his fragile life and having to hold the walls up makes him less than a shell of a man. I'm not that infant any more, the one from the times where he still envisioned an ideal life for himself when he and my mother separated I was four, he remarried shortly after to an alcoholic woman whose best and bright days were behind her. Today they are the poster children for incompetence and self-loathing. He sleeps all day while working a grueling sixty hours a week at the Duracell factory. She does nothing except cake the inside of the house with second hand smoke that adorns my clothes and seeps into my skin. It is amongst these caregivers that I have spent the past seven years of my life. So many times I have wanted to give up the struggles of my life and succumb to their ways, the ways generations of my family have given into. There was once a time I sat with arms tucked around my knees, my head banging back forth off the walls of the wooden bathroom door. His fist banged up against the outside, rattling my head, my entire soul.

"God I wish I would've never taken you in. All you do is bitch and complain. You don't like the smoking or you don't like the drinking. Well guess what son, it's my Goddamn house. I'll drink if I want to!"

I heard the all-too-familiar sound of glass crashing up against a brick wall, cascading the room with small shards and leaving the rest of the peach schnapps dripping down the dried mortar.

"If you don't like how I run things around here then you can go back to your

bitch mother's house. Oh wait she doesn't want you either. It's either her or that pencil dick new husband of hers."

His words cut like a searing pain, hotter than the tears piercing the pores of my reddend cheeks.

"I can't wait until you get out from that godforsaken school and leave my house so that I don't have to deal with this shit any more. I'll never have to pay another dime for you again."

That's when it really hit me. Staring into the lines in the grout of the chilled tile floor, I knew it came back, once again, to money. The reason my mom left him. The reason his mother still bailed him out from his car payments. The reason he was basically estranged from his miscreant kids. Every backwoods and hometown saturated decision this man had ever made was driven by financial gain, or lack thereof. Tired of all the years of his life eating away at itself, he had let the rage overcome him and in that betrayal of himself, he forgot about me. That once small child climbing upon his chest on a comfortable Sunday afternoon was no more. This world, the one with rebel flags and mud washed four-wheelers, had consumed us. He was no different than the men I would go on to work with. Yes, they were all linked by the inevitable: the ability of this country culture to make you say that you are just comfortable being what you are and that you never have to leave the cozy comfort of mama's couch and her crisp, fried chicken. My father could never escape that living room, that couch. The only question now was, would I be able to get off of that couch. That night on the cold bathroom floor with a comic book in my hand and fresh moisture on my face, the answer was no.

June 2004 – Age 13

I was a thirteen-year-old Georgian boy who had never been hunting. I sat there in the swing on my great uncle's front porch, watching our neighbors across the street. Their grandfather was packing the back of an old Mazda pick-up truck with rifles and camo-adorned tents. I sat there watching the glee in those young boys' eyes as they pranced around that old, dusty truck. What a thrill it must be to have nature at your fingertips, with your grandfather by your side sucking in the grease-covered machismo of staring at that bitch mother earth in the eye and taking something from her surface.

"Uncle Joe, how come we've never gone hunting before?" curiosity and envy rolling off my tongue.

"Well, I've never been a big hunter myself. I never really had the patience for it. Plus it's not for everyone. It takes a lot to be able to kill something. Some boys ain't got the stomach for it."

I took offense to his comment. How was I any less of a man in training than the two happy-go-lucky children across the road? My anger must have seeped through a bit.

"Well I want you to take me. I've never been and I want to go. I think it'd be fun."

He looked down at me with defiant eyes, daring me to become the man I thought I was destined to be. Then he blew me off.

"Well I'll think about it. If you want to shoot something then go get the BB gun and shoot some leaves in the back yard or something."

With this he indifferently left me there alone on the old front porch swing, my animosity at him coming to a boil. Who the hell did he think he was? I was every bit the man those other children were. I could be the cool grandson, the one whose Grandfather picks them up at 3 in the morning heading out to a deer stand to patiently wait to snatch up whatever God and nature were willing to throw at us. I decided that I would get to my destiny on my own terms and with that thought, my feet hit the concrete.

I forced myself across that old porch and into the bedroom where an old, rusted gun was propped up against a Chester wardrobe. I took its weight in my hand, shaking it to hear the metallic rattle of the BB's in the chamber and to pump the handle, bring air and life into a machine of death. I sauntered back outside, begging and pleading with the sky to send me a sign that I was a man, a man that took his life into his own hands. The sky, she answered my prayers as the whitest dove in all of Troup County landed on the telephone pole right in my own front yard.

I sat myself down on the red steps, propping my elbow on a slab of concrete next to me, red paint chips sticking to my sleeve from one of the worn out spots. I put my eyes down the sight, taking a more careful aim than I had ever done so before. His white, unsuspecting head twirled like a small machine, listening to the call of other birds and trying to spot delicious, pink worms in the earth's cold ground. As I pulled that trigger, my childhood fired out from that rustic barrel, striking the pitiful thing on the head and causing the greatest and most painful existential crisis that I had ever known. What followed next was sheer panic as something innocent, flopped to the earth in a senseless act of nothingness.

My world was turned upside down, a distorted lens of some foreign horror film as I watched the pigeon flap in a seizure like attack, his now muddied wing lashing out at the leaves fallen from August trees. Then after no more than a minute, he laid still, his yellow beak agape and his tiny eyes bulged. I touched my face and felt the warm sting of tears but these tears weren't familiar. No these were tears of death, capable from only the worst human being in all of God's existence. Dear God, how I wanted to die right there. I prayed for something, anything to end my miserable fucking life, leaving me nothing but a reddened stain between the cracks and pores of the sidewalk. I wanted my poisonous fucking heart to be ripped from my chest. At that moment I was no image of a man. I was not a child either. I was something else; something entirely too dark for the eyes of the world. Everything

and everyone around me told me this was what boys like me were supposed to do. We put on our disguises, cover ourselves in piss, and stalk the golden stalks and green grass intent to look into the eyes of something better than what we are, and end it, end its entire existence for no goddamn reason at all. This is what was told to me, something written in the codes of my bones and the bones of my fathers before me. I must have hit my fever pitch of tears and lament at this point as my uncle, with his wiry hair and wrinkled skin rushed to my side in a fit of sadness and rage.

"Damn it Jeremy. Why the hell did you do that?"

He could say nothing further. He didn't know the right words to say to me to take my world back to its beginning, before I become what was my destiny. As he walked away gently, I could see what he was thinking: I told you son. Some people just don't have the stomach, as he turned and headed to the barn to fetch a shovel.

He scooped up my eternal burden and tossed him into the woods like the leftovers that have lived in the fridge too long. I was powerless, my knees stuck to the ground and shame on my face. As life moved on, I was different forever from that day on. I lost my uncle a few years later. He laid in a hospice bed, his body twisted and contorted in unbearable ways because of the infection. I stared upon his face and even though he couldn't speak, he was there with me. I doubt that he even remembered that day in what would be his final hours but as I looked at him, I tried to let him know that I was going to be all right in my life, even though I never really would be. I would forever rage against my home and the bones in my body, desperate to break free but never getting off the ground, like a bird with a broken wing.

I.

Dad is no closer to the Father
than Judas was benevolent.

A God who annuls my power.

For I am cursed with humility
love, and mortality: a demigod.

I sacrifice pride for his approval.

For He is the creator of life
and I crave that strength.

A woman delivers me from sadness
and a life teeming with contempt.

But we must respect the ritual
so we seek a worthy beginning.

His blessing like a fertilizer
ripe in praise and affirmation.

II.

But I failed to grasp his wrath.

An immaculate storm forged
from his pain packed patriarchy.

My love gasping for air in his hate.

Now I choke in the foul,
fermented, feces he exudes.

Delivering plague upon plague-
he casts our bond into hell.

My father now rejects my being.

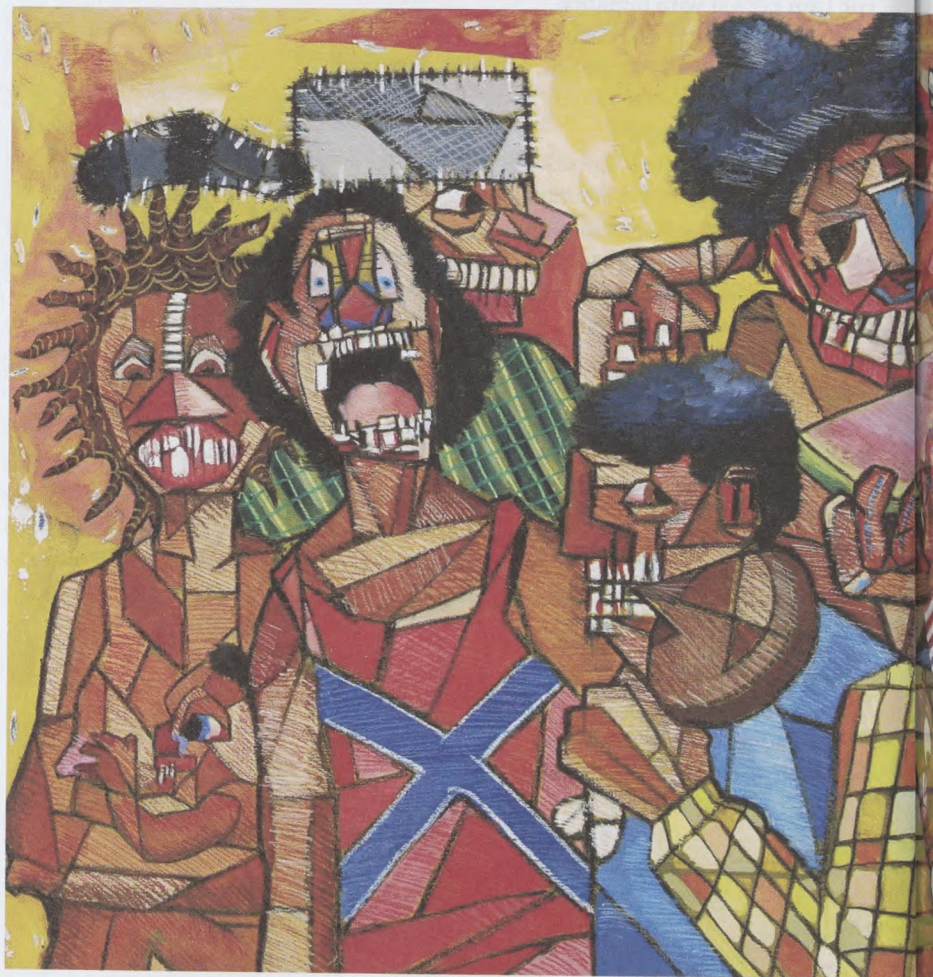
I the apostate now godless and free,
breathe life into the remnants of love.

While I act to forsake my blood,

So deeply orchestrated in his will.

ARDEN XVII

COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES BY BRAELN HILL





I gazed at the Colored-Only sign on the window while swinging in my squeaking barstool at some diner in downtown Selma. I was waiting for my cousin, Rodney, to stop running his mouth and pay the tab. My two best friends, Rick and Cody, were sitting in between Rodney and me. Rick was the biggest of the four of us. As the first-string defensive end for Booker T. Washington High School, he towered over half the football team. Cody and I were on the track team. I was a bit faster than Cody. He claimed he beat me in a race once, but I don't recall. Cody was smarter than me—book smart. And the black frame glasses he wore, were the icing on the cake. The three of us were ready to grab our diplomas in a couple of months and receive our acceptance letters to Morehouse. For Rodney, twelve years of schooling was all he needed. He was a full-time bellhop, who graduated two years before us. Although college was pointless to him, he still invited my friends and me to Selma as an early graduation present. The chance to march alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the best present anyone could've given me, even though we were in the back of the crowd. I wished I could've seen Dr. King up-close and in color. But the fact that I was even there, was good enough for me. We were supposed to march all the way to Montgomery, but all of us ended up turning back around. Now, the four of us were about to head back to Memphis. After Rodney finally paid the man, we paraded out of the door with our fists pumped in the air and sang: "Ain't gonna let nobody, turn me around, turn me around, turn me around . . ."

Rodney sang over us: "Ain't gonna let no asshole . . ." We burst out laughing, but I stopped when I noticed the white cop across the street staring at us, as he leaned on a parking meter. Rodney was still singing.

"Alright man, lower your voice," I said.

"What you talkin' bout? That cop?" Rodney said. "Man, fuck him," but he stopped singing. I hopped in the passenger seat of Linda: a forest green 1953 Lincoln Capri. Rodney walked around the car three times. He lifted the hood, twice. He kicked the tires. He scanned for scratches. He wiped the left side mirror with the fog from his breath. I honked the horn. He instantly dropped to the ground, as if he was in boot camp about to do pushups, just to examine the pipes under this car. Rick reached from the backseat and honked the horn four times with no pauses in between. Rodney rose up and wiped the left side mirror once more. I reached over and rolled down the driver's seat window.

"We wanna get to Memphis before the next century," I said. When Rodney got in, I glanced across the street. The cop never took his eyes off of us. He tapped the side of his right leg with his club. The sound of the engine starting relieved me. The glaring cop in the rear view mirror shrunk, as we left Selma behind. We drove through the spacious countryside of Alabama. Looking at all that green made me dozy. Suddenly, the peace was broken by sirens. I woke to a speeding police car that

was getting bigger in the right side mirror.

"It's that cop from town," I said.

"What cop?" Rodney said.

"The one who was looking at us."

"What the hell he want?!" Rodney said. "Y'all think I can out run him?" He pulled over when he saw my "I'm not playing" face.

"It's Rodney's fault. Why did you say asshole?" Cody said.

"Shut up—you wasn't saying shit when you was laughing," Rodney replied. I looked out the rear window, wondering if the cop would ever get out. My frustration matched the tempo of my heartbeats perfectly. Rodney's left elbow was resting on the door. He held his left eyebrow up with his thumb, glancing at the rear view mirror every few seconds. The police car door swung open. "Bout time," he said. The cop stepped out. My heart was punching at my ribs when he stood before Rodney.

"Where y'all boys headed?" the cop said. Rodney didn't say a word. He just stared at the open road ahead.

"Memphis, sir," I said.

"I was talking to this boy," the cop said. "I said, where y'all headed?" Rodney took his time to answer. When he finally said Memphis, the cop whacked the roof with his club. Rodney was the only one who didn't flinch.

"Get out the car—everybody!" he said. I wanted to punch Rodney in his jaw. He made us line up in front of him against the car.

"What did we do, sir?" Cody asked.

"Shut up, boy. I didn't say you could speak." He called his partner, who I didn't even know was in the car. They arrested us and took us to the local police station. We stayed in a cell overnight, not knowing what we did to get there in the first place. Rodney punched the cement wall with all of his might. I knew it hurt. He sat on the bench beside me and puffed. Each puff was harder than the last. He wasted a whole hour talking trash and whining about Linda. The next morning, we were freed. We were told the reason we were arrested was because Rodney wasn't obeying the speed limit, and that he disrespected the authorities. I wasn't getting thrown back into a cell again, so I didn't argue with the man. Rodney surprisingly held his tongue too.

"Where's my car?" Rodney said.

"It's parked out front," the white-haired man with the beer belly said. He leaned back in his chair, reached into his pocket and dropped the keys to Linda on the counter. Rodney snatched them and rushed outside. The second he laid eyes on Linda, he turned around and looked at me. He wanted me to tell him that Linda wasn't scratched. But I couldn't lie to him. It was the biggest scratch I had ever seen. Linda's scar started from door on the driver's side and wrapped around the

trunk to side mirror on the passenger side. There was no way this was an accident. Rodney stormed into the police station and barked at the man at the counter.

"You get yo ass in that car and get outta here now. I'm not gonna tell you again," the man said. He opened a banana yellow folder and began scribbling. Rodney stared at the thinning white hair on the man's head, balling up his fist. The man sat in his chair and folded his arms. "You deaf?" he said.

"Rodney, it's just a scratch," I said.

"We'll get it fixed," Cody said.

"Yeah, let it go, man," Rick said.

Rodney turned around and marched towards the door. He nudged all three of us on the way out. We stopped at the same diner from the day before. This time we were at a booth all the way in the back. Rick was rotating the salt shaker on the table. He jerked and knocked it over when Rodney hammered the table with his right fist. "This is bullshit!" He said. "Fuck that cop, fuck Alabama . . . fuck white people!" Some customers, who overheard him, stared at him. Rick, Cody and I were just as mad as Rodney, if not madder, because it was somewhat his fault. But we were tired. We were ready to get back to familiar faces and take a shower. "We can't let them do this to us and get away with it. We need to get revenge," my foolish cousin said.

"If you're planning on looking for that cop and doing something stupid, I'm not with you. I'll just catch the Greyhound back," I said. I was bluffing because I didn't have enough to ride all the way to Memphis. Rick and Cody were against Rodney's stupid plan too.

"Y'all a bunch of cowards," Rodney said. "Rick, you're supposed be tough."

"I am," Rick said. "I'm just not stupid." We weren't crazy enough to mess with a white cop in the South.

"Let it go, Rodney," Rick said. Rodney came to his senses and dropped the whole thing. Deep in my mind, I knew Rodney wasn't brave enough to go through with such a ridiculous plan. After we left the diner and drove a mile down the road, we came across a small group of Ku Klux Klan members on the sidewalk, who were protesting to get blacks out of the neighborhood. I had never seen the Klan until that day. I saw a burning cross one time, but that's all. And I didn't expect to see them in the broad daylight.

"Alabama's a trip," Cody said, as we watched the ghosts pacing on the sidewalk in front of a church. I didn't make eye contact, but I still felt their hateful eyes burning a hole into the side of my head. I was ready to ride right passed them. Rodney slammed on the brakes. He parked against the curve and shoved the door open. He slammed the door so hard. I'm surprised it didn't break off. One Klan member held up a sign that said, "No Room for Coloreds." Rodney charged toward the Klan, who was chanting "Whites only."

"What is he doing?!" Cody asked. I knew right away what he was doing.

"Fuck y'all!" Rodney said holding up both middle fingers as he walked towards them. He got their attention. They didn't retaliate, probably because it was a public place. I hopped out and ran towards him. I grabbed him.

"Let me go," he yelled.

"I get it. You're mad. We're all mad, but we ain't dying because of you. Get in the car!" He agreed to get in the car and not to stop until we were in Memphis. The car ride was quiet. Rodney was mad, so he wasn't talking and Rick and Cody had fallen asleep in the back. I gazed at the orange sky thinking about how lucky we were the men in the white hoods didn't come after us. As soon as that thought passed, a white Chevrolet pickup truck was behind us. It sped up and rammed us. The whiplash woke the two sleepy heads in the back.

"What's going on?" Cody yelled. Rodney swerved over to the left side of the clear road and the truck did the same. Thank God we were the only ones on the road. The truck sped over to the right of us and began racing us. A man dressed like a red ghost gripped the wheel with his life. He turned the wheel and thumped us, as a dog howled from the backseat of the truck. He and Rodney were playing bumper cars until he ran us off the road. A ditch caught us. The hood flew open. "Come on, let's go!" Cody said, looking out the back window, watching the Klan members exiting the truck.

"It's stuck!" Rodney said. We had to leave Linda behind. We rushed towards the open field ahead. A gun fired. "Don't move, unless you want your fuckin' heads blown off!" the only man in red said. The four of us froze. We were escorted through the field and into the woods by five men in white hoods and their hound. Two of them held rifles. One of the men poked my back with the barrel of the rifle in between my shoulder blades. I tripped over a rock and would have fallen if the man behind didn't have a tight grip on my shirt. He snatched my shirt and thrust the barrel into my back. "Watch yo step, boy," he said. The red ghost leading the way stopped to light a torch. We continued into the woods and paused under a huge oak tree. A rope dropped with a loop that was tied with perfection. I closed my eyes and wished to be anywhere else in the world. We were forced down to our knees. The four of us lined up, facing the tree. From left to right, I was the first one, then Cody, Rodney, and Rick. The rifle was now poking my skull. The other gun was aimed at Rick's heart. Cody's glasses were snatched off his face and hurled away into the deep, dark woods.

The Klan leader kicked a bunch of twigs into a pile on the ground and lit them with his torch. "Which one said 'fuck y'all'? I want him to go first!" he said, standing in front of the fire, as he held the torch up like the Statue of liberty. One of the Klan members pointed Rodney out. They yanked him up off the ground and put his neck through the loop of the rope. They stood under the lowest branch

of the oak tree. The other end of the rope was tossed around the branch. As two Klan members held the tight rope in place, Rodney's legs trembled. He balanced all of his weight on his tippy-toes. The man who was holding the rope, revealed his face. I was surprised to see it was the cop who pulled us over for nothing. He grinned at Rodney. "Put ya goddamn hood back on!" the Klan leader said. The cop slipped the ghost mask back on. The four men pulled the rope. Rodney's feet left the ground. The hound jumped to reach him and barked when Rodney got too high. "Harley! Get over here!" The dog ran to the Klan leader's side. As he rose, Rodney's body slowly twirled and faced me. The eyes of my cousin, who I never saw shed a tear, begged for forgiveness and help. His sad, brown eyes gently closed and never opened again. The part of me that was still alive stared at the ground, knowing that one of us was next.

"Alright, who's next?" the Klan leader said. They dragged Rick towards the oak tree. The men had to use all of their strength to get him in the air. Rick wasted his last few minutes floating in fear. He reached for the top of the rope as his body twirled. "Rick's arms dropped to his sides. He drifted somewhere with Rodney. "Two down, two to go!" the Klan leader said.

When they snatched me from the ground, it was like pulling out a root. I was jabbed in the stomach. I bent forward. They pulled me back and straightened my shoulders. The loop was dropped around my neck, as I stared deep into the Klan leader's eyes. I could see the flames rising in his eyes. They were redder than the sheets he wore and hotter than the fire he stood in front of. I turned away. The rope was thrown up. It didn't make it over the branch. That's when I took off. I was yanked back before I took my third step. All their eyes were on me. They forgot about Cody, who was on his knees unsupervised. Cody ran through the dark woods. They shot at him, but he was too fast. Three Klan members and the hound chased him. That's when I took the rope off and ran around the oak tree.

"Get that nigger!" the Klan leader said.

The man couldn't catch me. I ran through woods in a different direction from Cody. I heard the barking of the hound and three gun shots, and then it was silent. I had hoped Cody had gotten away. I continued through the woods, I ran faster when I heard scurrying footsteps, it was the hound. I climbed the nearest tree. I stared down upon the sniffing dog as it was approaching. The branch I stood on was beginning to break. The dog was alarmed by the cracking sound and barked until the men arrived. But by then, I had climbed unto a tree nearby. The men didn't see me, they figured it was nothing and proceeded on. I didn't know where I was and how I was going to get out. So I hopped down and decided to run north. Moments of venturing through the woods, I could see the field that we walked through earlier. I ran towards the plains and was stunned at the sight of my good friend, Cody lying on his stomach with bullet holes in his back. I flinched when I

heard the barking hound. It must have picked up my scent. I sprinted through the field. When I finally made it to the road, I dropped to my knees and threw up. A car coming up the road almost hit me. It swerved around me and stopped. The license plate was the last thing I saw before I lost consciousness. When I woke, I was lying in an elderly black couple's backseat. The man was driving like he had just robbed a bank. His wife was in the passenger seat, praying to God. They heard me grunting.

"Thank you, God," the woman said. "Are you okay, did we hit you?" I couldn't say a word.

In a local colored-only hospital, I was lying under the sheets emotionally paralyzed. I left Selma two days later, but I was planning on returning soon—to seek justice. With my folks by my side and with the help of my best friends' family, we stopped at nothing. There were so many sit-ins and marches, I had lost count. Most of them led to black and blue faces and discouraged souls. But it was those powerful speeches that poured hope back into my heart. It wasn't until a few years after I graduated from Morehouse that justice prevailed. The cop who pulled us over was sentenced to life in prison, along with two other men. But the two unidentified monsters weren't tried. As I watched that handcuffed cop being hauled out of court, I could feel the ropes loosen from my friends' necks. I knew somewhere, their smiles were raining on me.

ARDEN XVII

GUIDE BY GAZZI HOLLOWAY



I went out into the world
piece by piece and
fingers danced
across my skin with
paring knives and
I mailed it off in
letters, then
my hair was woven into
spider webs
and my eyes stolen
in the talons
of seagulls
as my toes and my
legs and my body
left me for the world
until I was
trembling
against a café
table with
nothing left to send.

A paper was pressed
into my fingers,
marbles to my
temples, feathers
to my chin

and suddenly
I could see
as words flew
from the paper
to my mind and
flowed from my
mouth like a river
as rust fell
from the hinges of
my jaw
as air rushed into
me.

I smiled. You spoke.
Nothing.

My ears had not
returned
but you wrote on
a napkin you
would wait
and you taught me
how to read
the air leaving
your lips and
the rhythm of your throat.

I pressed my face up to the window of my former fiancé's apartment as he got up from the couch and took the hand of a petite brunette... *moved on from blondes I see.* A lead ball fell into my gut as I watched them go into our bedroom. I wanted to cry, but no longer possessed the ability.

I let my head hang and tried to breathe as steadily as I could. I was trembling, and it wasn't from the cold.

You should have moved on when you had the chance, I said to myself. *You should have left him behind three years ago.*

"Hey," came a smooth voice behind me. I jumped and scrambled away from the window. My feet got tangled in each other and I fell onto my back.

Way to go, Ellen, I thought.

"Ouch," I huffed as I rubbed my backside. "Alden, you scared me." I scowled at the six foot young man that stood in front of me. He rolled his ice-blue, oriental eyes at my tumble. He flipped his dark hair out of his eyes.

"You called me," he said defensively. He reached down and took hold of my wrist and hauled me to my feet.

"Yeah, I did." If I could blush I would've. "Tray used to tell me I was as skittish as a wild cat."

"Is he in there?" Alden asked, peering in through the window.

I nodded and sighed, depressed by the fact my breath wasn't visible in the thirty degree weather. Stealing a glance at the empty living room, I headed towards the front door.

"Hey, Ellen," I heard Alden call from behind me. But he didn't reach me in time. I stormed up the front porch and entered through the door into the one bedroom apartment. The moment I entered the foyer, I could hear the duh-dum of the *Jaws* score playing through the bedroom door. It was Tray's favorite movie of all time. The fact he was watching it with Miss. Prim-and-Trim hurt me more than how much he smiled when he was with her.

Alden sat next to me as I collapsed onto the couch. It didn't creak or shift under my weightlessness. The crisp clean scent of Tray's cologne was so familiar I almost burst into tears.

"You can't stay here you know," Alden's deep voice ran across my ears. "You're dead. He's moved on."

His words were like a hammer shattering my heart. I swallowed back the tears that threatened to spill from my eyes.

"If I were you, Alden, I'd leave the eloquent speeches to someone else."

"It's true I was never quite as perceptive to the emotions of others. Not many Angels of Death are." I could feel Alden's eyes on my back as I stood and walked over to the mantelpiece. There was a picture of me sitting in the middle of the mantel. It had to be my favorite picture. My blonde hair had been worked into soft

curls that cascaded over my shoulders. In the background were the maple trees that scattered over my parents' property. It had been fall when we'd taken the picture, and the orange leaves contrasted beautifully with my dark sweater, and matched my red, wool scarf.

My fingers traced the black frame of the picture. Three years, and I still couldn't believe how physical everything felt. I could touch objects, feel their solidity, but I couldn't move or grab anything. The only thing I couldn't touch was a living person.

"It's because you're on a different plane," Alden had explained when I met him a year ago. "You and other ghosts and I can all touch because we live in the same world: the Afterlife."

I withdrew my fingers from the picture but didn't turn to look at my Angel of Death.

"Did I ever tell you this picture was taken in celebration of our engagement? We were on our way home after taking these when the car accident happened. We planned to get married in June."

"Ellen," Alden addressed me. I refused to face him because I knew the moment I did, he'd say what I didn't want to hear.

"Ellen," Alden said again. "You need to move on." It didn't seem to matter whether I was facing him or not. "It's not safe for you to be here so long. Spirits need to move on. The longer you stay, the more of your humanity you lose. You'll be nothing but a poltergeist, and then I'll have to rip you from this world. You'll no longer exist if I do that."

I took a shaky breath. I touched the red roses in black ribbon next to my picture.

"He begged me to stay," I said, my voice thick.

"He was asking you to stay alive, Ellen. He didn't want you to pass away, but you did. It's taken him three years to move on from you. You should be happy for him."

My throat tightened at the thought of appreciating the fact Tray was finding comfort in another woman. I heard a bloodcurdling scream come from the TV in the other room as Jaws locked his teeth on some poor victim. I could relate to that feeling. Some massive force gripping onto your body, ripping you further and further into the black abyss. Utter defenselessness.

"He's supposed to be with me," I turned to face Alden, tears falling down my cheeks.

"That may have been the case when you were alive, Ellen, but you're not anymore." Alden spun around and looked out the window at the rainbow Christmas decorations lighting up the neighbor's house.

"When I first met you, Ellen, you were a ghost moping around your boy-

friend's apartment, depressed," Alden continued. "We've spent the last two years making progress on your unfinished business. He is the last person you wanted to see. Now it's time to leave."

"Yeah, well, I didn't know that in the last year he'd gotten a girlfriend." I glanced over at the room and felt the bubble in my chest pop.

"Be happy for him," Alden ordered.

"No!" I cried, rage and resentment cramping my heart. "I wasn't supposed to die! We were going to get married! We were going to have kids! It's not fair! Why does he get to move on and find someone else to love while I'm stuck with my feelings?! I don't get to find someone else to love or be happy with!"

Suddenly, Alden's arms were around me, keeping me from falling to my knees. Dry sobs ripped through my body. I wanted the arms that held me to be Tray's. I wanted to feel his warmth, to feel his skin against my own.

I sat there for a moment, imagining it was Tray holding me, but after the minutes had ticked by, I pushed myself free. Alden let me go with a face of indifference.

"She'll never know him like I do," I sniffed. "She'll never make him as happy as I did when I was alive."

Alden shook his head, and my anger deepened. Why couldn't he see that I was the only one that Tray was meant to be with?

"Ellen, you can't feel like that. Do you really think this is what Tray wanted for you? Do you really think when he was begging you to stay, that this is what he wanted? You to be haunting him, causing yourself pain? It isn't!"

"I don't care what he wants. And I don't care what you want. I just want to be with him. She will never understand him."

The sound of the door hinges squeaking cut off any further arguing as Tray's new girlfriend walked out into the living room. For a fraction of a second, I thought she had heard us fighting.

"I got you something," the brunette said, rushing to get her keys.

"It can wait," Tray said from the entrance of the bedroom. I was grateful to see his clothes were still on.

"No, because it's not just for you." She held her keys up in victory and quickly ran outside to her blue Nissan Altima. My eyes drank him in as he moved to the front door. His curly brown hair and his baby-blue eyes. I heard the sound of her car door and her heeled boots on the porch.

"Mina," I heard Tray whisper. "What is this?" He moved to allow her back inside the house. My breath caught as I took in the beautiful mass of open-faced lilies that were gathered in her hands.

"You told me that Ellen's favorite flowers were sunset orange, open-face lilies." She sauntered over to the mantelpiece.

I glanced over at Tray's face and saw that he was on the verge of tears.

Mina turned around and smiled at him. "I just thought that she would love to see something other than the roses." When she saw the tears on his face she hesitated. "I can leave the roses if you want."

Tray shook his head, and I could feel something in my chest aside from anger. "You remembered her favorite flowers?" Tray moved closer to Mina.

Mina gave another smile. "Of course. She was very important to you. This may sound weird, but I feel like that's something that connects me to her. We both saw how special you were the moment we saw you. I wish I could've known her."

I lifted my hand and lightly touched the delicate petals. New tears sprung to my eyes, but they weren't tears of sadness.

"I've been wanting to buy some," Tray's shattered voice broke through the silence. "I've just never had the courage."

"Why?" Mina asked, taking him over to the sofa to sit. I sat down on the coffee table in front of him. Alden stood like a shadow behind me, his hands in his leather jacket.

Tray breathed out a heavy sigh, wiping his eyes in the process. "I guess I was just afraid that if I did, it would mean that I was really moving on from her, and I don't want her to think that I'm forgetting her."

Mina rubbed her fingers through his hair, something I would do when he was upset. It was something I would've done now if I could feel him.

"You're not forgetting her," Mina whispered, resting her forehead on his cheek. I could see her dark eyelashes stroking his skin each time she blinked. "I could never replace her. There is a piece of your heart she took with her when she passed, and that is a part of you that I can never touch, but I can bring you happiness. I can help you pick up the pieces, just as you have done for me."

I stiffened. "What?" I glanced over at Alden. He nodded his head.

"Her husband died two years ago from brain cancer. I remember because I helped him move on. They ultimately knew it was going to happen, but you're never really ready for it. Still, her husband knew what was best for her. He actually helped her find her way to Tray." Alden paused to look over at me. "She understands what he's going through."

I looked back at my fiancé and his girlfriend.

"Getting rid of the roses is not you forgetting her. It's you celebrating a part of her. It's time to stop mourning her death," Mina continued, "and start celebrating her life." She got up and grabbed her purse. Digging through the contents, she produced a glass bottle of cologne.

"This used to belong to David. It was his favorite cologne. I keep it with me as a way to remember him." She sprayed the bottle and it smelled like Tray, only a bit more spiced.

"It's a way to celebrate his life." She motioned towards the flowers. "That's how

you can celebrate hers."

Tray laughed and then pulled her down for a kiss.

My eyes fell to the floor. Alden's hand appeared in front of my eyes. Without moving my head, I reached out and took hold of his fingers. The next thing I knew we were outside, standing in front of the driveway. The Christmas lights decorating the neighbor's house were our only source of light.

"Are you okay?" He asked.

"Yeah," I mumbled. "I guess she isn't so bad."

I sighed, taking note of the fact that I couldn't feel the cold anymore. I hadn't noticed it before.

Without any warning, I began to sob again. My hand rested on my chest. It felt like my heart was being torn apart.

"If I'm dead," I said between sobs, "why does it still hurt so much?"

Alden took my face in his hands and gently raised my face up. In the year that I had known Alden, this had to be one of the most sensitive things I'd ever experienced him doing.

"In all the years that I've been an Angel of Death, I've come to learn that a heart that doesn't beat can still break. But you know what, Ellen? You are going to find so much happiness on the other side."

"H-how do you kn-know that?"

"I have a few friends who can vouch for it," he smiled.

I gave a small laugh, the first one since...I couldn't even remember when.

"What do you say?" Alden asked. "Are you ready?"

I gazed back at the house where I knew Tray was with Mina. A feeling of longing swept through me, but I knew that if I went back to that window, if I took one more look at him, I would want to stay behind.

With that in mind, I shook my head, straightened my shoulders, and fluffed my hair. "How do I look? If I'm going to be moving on and seeing my dead relatives, I want to look good."

Alden stretched out his hand, "You look great."

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I once again took hold of his hand.

A feeling of weightlessness took hold of my body, and a white light blinded my vision. I closed my eyes to blot it out, and then there was darkness.

I peeled the lids away from my eyes and gasped. In front of me was a gate. It wasn't attached to anything, there was nothing on the other side, and it wasn't set against any walls. It just stood there.

"It isn't really what I expected." I indicated towards what I assumed was the portal to the Afterlife. Half of the gate was made of what seemed to be white crystal, while the other half was made of black iron.

"Each angel has his or her own gate. This is what mine looks like."

"Is there a reason why every gate is different?"

He shrugged. "There are some things even we can't explain."

I nodded and looked back at the gate. The crystal door began to open, and a sliver of a white-blue light chased away the darkness in the room, which I only now realized was made of stone. But that was the last thing I noticed. The moment the light hit my body, I felt a tug.

I backed up into Alden as panic rose up into my throat. "Wait," I turned to face him. "I'm scared."

Alden nodded and then spun me around. For a moment, I fought against his grip, but stopped when his hands rested over my eyes.

"Open your senses, Ellen. What do you notice?"

I sniffed the air and froze. It smelled like Tray, only behind that crisp clean smell was a hint of spice.

"Is that?" I pulled Alden's hands from my eyes.

"Mina's husband," he answered. "He was the last to pass through that gate; sometimes remnants of the soul is left behind, usually the scent."

I straightened my jacket again. If Mina's husband could make it through the gate then I should have the courage to do the same.

"Okay." I gave Alden one more smile before I stepped back towards the gate. "I think I'm ready to go now."

Alden smiled back. "Send me a letter."

"Forget that," I scoffed. "I'll get you a postcard." The crystal door opened and I felt myself being pulled towards the blue-white light. In that moment I let everything go, the pain and sorrow of dying, the fear of what lay ahead. A tranquility rested on my body like a blanket. I finally felt at peace.

ROOMMATES (FILM STILL) BY GAZZI HOLLOWAY



ARDEN XVII

GOD OF VIOLENCE BY JEREMY ANDREWS

Blood seeps through cobblestone cracks,
Reverberating throughout the chronicles of
Violence as Whitechapel is reborn in
Bright, violent shades of red.
He cradles her dusty head in his lap,
Cuddling while he carves, cutting away
Kidneys and London's comfort,
Smearing the brick Victorian walls,
Sending an iron and glucose filled note.

To the ill repute women on the streets,
To the idiosyncrasy of shady street merchants.
To the ignorant constables marauding hope,
To the idealist philosophers coaxing the court.
To the idiotic jesters crusading for laughs,
To the immobilized children sleeping in fear.
To the iguanaian thieves scaling the city's underbelly,
To the incandescent lovers above it all and
To the imperious Queen caring only for the historians.

From Mitre Square to Berner Street, your infamy
Envelops the Great Kingdom. This city is now yours.
Unassuming tourists will walk by your sacred sites,
Staring through those crack searching for any
Remnants of the work your God called you to.
Your God asked these things of you, implored you to
Wicked, holy deeds the same way he begged the others,
Pressuring your peers in perilous deeds, pursue them all
Jack. Perceive the ways of those before and after you like—

The brother who wrongly slain his own,
The betrayer Brute impaling his king.
The brunette bloodlines killing Hollywood,
The brazen Milwaukie man consuming flesh.
The boisterous clown abusing the neighborhood kids,
The bullied kids who blast his classmates away.
The bullet bearing sniper assaulting our capital,
The bronzed skin men burning down our towers and
The broken robes whose blades burst through our journalists.

Agents of anarchy one and all,
Violence in the voice of your God's call.

The preacher lifted his arms out with conviction with his palms flat and his fingers relaxed as if parting the Red Sea. His face displayed confidence and comfort. The congregation was tense and calm all at once as the old wooden church creaked with the stirring of feet and souls. The pale faces fixated straight ahead on their charismatic leader with the cross erect behind him.

"Now there ain't no need to fear God. He is among us in this valley of the shadow of death."

The preacher spoke with resonance and warning. He paced in front of the pews, his heel landing almost a full second before the rest of his foot. His white buttoned-down shirt was crinkled, stained with splotches of sweat, his sleeves rolled up above his elbow and his black trousers were a size too big, but rather neatly hemmed and ironed. His oxfords were weathered which only added character to the overall figure that walked in them. He was balding but kept the color in his hair, combed but tousled from removing the sweat that dripped periodically because the time was August and the dog days were not so forgiving, regardless of your faith.

"If God is in your heart, fear has no room to grow. Not in a Christian heart. No sir. If it does exist, then you ain't got God in your heart. So shun Satan and his fearful ways and let God cleanse you of your fear!"

The congregation began to make noise, not jeers or cheers but rather "amens" and "that's rights." The fans wavered more quickly towards the faces of gaunt elderly women, picking up the slack their oversized hats left. A boy no older than ten sat in the back pew at the far end towards the inside row, peering around the taller figures in front of him. His mother, to his left, clutched his hand.

"Now, now Huel, just sit still and be mindful. This is important for you to see, that's why I'm lettin' you sit in on church today."

There was a children's church out back in the yard of the church with mostly arts, crafts, and sing-songy lessons about Noah, Moses, and Jonah, but Huel's mother placed him in the adult congregation this time for good reason, according to her. Last Monday, Huel lost his daddy in what seemed like a mundane turn of events, if not for nature's unforgiving missteps.

Monday began as usual with Joe rising early to harvest the tobacco that sprung forth this time of year. He made the majority of his income around August and September selling his entire crop in town since he was the only tobacco grower in the county and was especially successful in crop yield year after year. Joe situated Birdie, the field mule, to haul the wagon carrying the leaves he carefully hauled from the ground, row by row. Huel rode atop Birdie for the morning until Mama called them both in for lunch. Following lunch, Huel stayed inside for a brief nap and story time (she read from the Book of Job). The sky was overcast, dropping the temperature a few degrees. After tending the field for most of the day, the sky turned dark and clouds began to form. A huge storm brewed overhead as Joe

hustled to gather the crop before the rain started. When tobacco gets wet then handled by human hands, a man gets sick from it. The chemicals seep into his skin. His blood gets poisoned, turning against him, making him weak and dizzy. Some folks have died from it, but it takes a lot of touching in order for it to fight back. Joe had had his fair share of tobacco sickness, almost dying once, so he tried to avoid it if he could. He preferred his blood to be clean after a hard day's work.

As Birdie made her way to the barn, the rain began to fall. Joe threw burlap over the wagon to cover up the crop. He opened the barn door and directed Birdie inside. Once she and the wagon were covered, he unhitched the two. As he began to come around from the wagon, a lightning bolt struck nearby with a scream of thunder. Birdie got startled and lifted her back legs up, striking Joe in the face. Within an hour, his wife became worried when he hadn't made his way up from the barn to the house. She found him with his nose sunken into his skull.

The next day, the arrangements were made and Birdie was put down. She wasn't sold because nobody wanted a mule with ill intent. That sort of evil could bring the plague to a man's crop or she might lash out again, so the decision was made to rid this world of her stigma. The entire tobacco crop was sold with good profit, same as usual. Huel took his father's death well, all things considered. His mother cried every night. She decided it was time for Huel to become a man and any person called a man must be one of God. The next Sunday saw Huel and his mother in the adult congregation for the first time.

"I don't understand, Mama. I wanna go to my church."

"Hush, son. You are the man of the house now. Things will be different from here on out. Reverend Connors is gonna teach you not to fear anything in this world so you can overcome everything. You understand?"

"Yes'm."

Huel became puzzled but continued to direct his eyes up front.

"God can overcome anything. And if He is in you, then *you* can overcome anything. It's the last Sunday of the month, so that means we continue the ritual of testing our faith in God by way of taming the devil. We know it is hard to recognize the devil in the world because he is conniving and sneaky, but we do see the devil in one thing for certainty."

Just then, a short, and portly man carrying a wicker basket with both hands made his way down the aisle. He placed the basket at the feet of Reverend Connors then proceeded back to his seat. Reverend Connor lifted the top from the basket. He reached his hands inside with ease. Both hands appeared from the basket, each one holding a plump rattlesnake.

"Satan is visible in the markings and fangs of these creatures. The fall of man can be traced to the serpent's tricks, and we place blame on these snakes for the sins of mankind. We must overcome and not fear these creatures that possess every

thread of Satan. God is in our hearts and he will drive away the evil of the serpent, for they cannot harm us in any way! God is in my heart, these spawns of Satan cannot do harm unto me!"

Each word he spoke became louder and faster than the previous one. His grasp on the snakes became more firm with each utterance.

"Come forth, children of God. Do not fear Satan and his children, for in the battle of God and Satan, God always conquers!"

Just then, three men in the congregation stood up and proceeded towards the front. They stood looking down into the basket.

"Do not fear, God will not cause any harm to come unto you."

The three men, one by one, reached down in the wicker basket and picked up a poisonous snake. They were visibly uncomfortable as their faces displayed stressful lines and their brows were furrowed by their ignorance to snake handling. The men began to gain confidence when none of the snakes sunk their teeth into them.

"I'm afraid, Mama."

"There ain't no need to be afraid, see? They ain't afraid because of God and neither should you."

"But daddy always killed the snakes he found in the field. He said there was no good in the world they could bring and there was no use for them. Why don't they kill those snakes?"

"Because they show us not to be afraid, you hear? Your daddy had fear and look what happened. He ain't here no more because of it. If only he had God in his heart, then he would still be alive today. No evil will come to you if you don't fear a thing."

Reverend Connors stepped towards the middle row of the congregation, close to the first row of pews. His arms were extended with the snakes wrapped around each forearm. The rattler on his left arm began to make a noise so familiar to farmers and hunters. Just then, the serpent bit Connors' wrist. The preacher did not flinch.

"Feed on my flesh all you want, for this flesh is made from God!"

The other men, their faces full of anguish, placed the snakes back in the wicker basket and hustled back to their place in the crowd.

"That is alright, men. I am fully aware of God's good graces. He has blessed me a thousand times over and for that I am thankful. Hell hath no fury like that of God's and I shall not perish from a spawn of Satan's poison. All is well with my soul and my body!"

He continued to hold the snakes for a few more minutes before placing them back in the basket and putting the top back on it. The short, portly man returned it to the back of the church shortly thereafter. The church service ended as Huel and his mother made their way back up the road towards the farmhouse.

"Now I hope you remember to never be afraid of anything in this world, you

hear? God is always with you and no evil shall fall upon you because of that. You understand, Huel?"

"Yes'm."

Huel understood that his father was afraid and it killed him. The same man that worked to feed his wife and child was a coward who did not handle snakes but rather decapitated them. That was the wrong thing to do. He learned instead that the right thing to do was to pick them up and let them do their worst, for fear is a thing possessed by evil and evil has no place in the hearts of Godly men.

When Reverend Connors died that night from the rattlesnake bite, the town was shocked. The thirty members of the congregation gathered the next day at the church to place flowers at the altar. They formed a circle on the lawn outside the church and watched the wicker basket burn until there was nothing but ashes and bones left. He watched as the smoke floated up towards heaven, where he assumed his father and Reverend Connors were. The smell of burning serpent flesh bit the ends of Huel's nostrils and became a piercing smell that would stay with him. He wondered if the departed could smell the same flesh he could. It didn't matter if they did or not. Fear or no fear, death came for both of them and there was no stopping that.

ARDEN XVII

PRESERVATION BY CHRIS DELANO

In the hospital, I am dry.
These halls, in their florescence,
Shine with the thick layer
Of wax and lysol, buffed smooth

Until reflective and dangerous.
The smell of boiling flowers, left
Unloved by the attended sleepers
On windowsills where there is sunlight

Scorching through glass, is a fog.
I'm adrift in the waiting room linoleum,
Floating like the opposite of an oasis
Among the positivity of patients,

Always afraid of getting wet.
"My count is high," says one
To no one, but also to the ocean
Of virus blood, such hope there,

And I hope you get out soon.
My lips are chapped with prayer,
But I never prayed before this;
I never prayed before you

Came home wet-faced, ashamed.
Decades were washed in tears,
In sweat, and that death-bile
Mixed with cursed blood

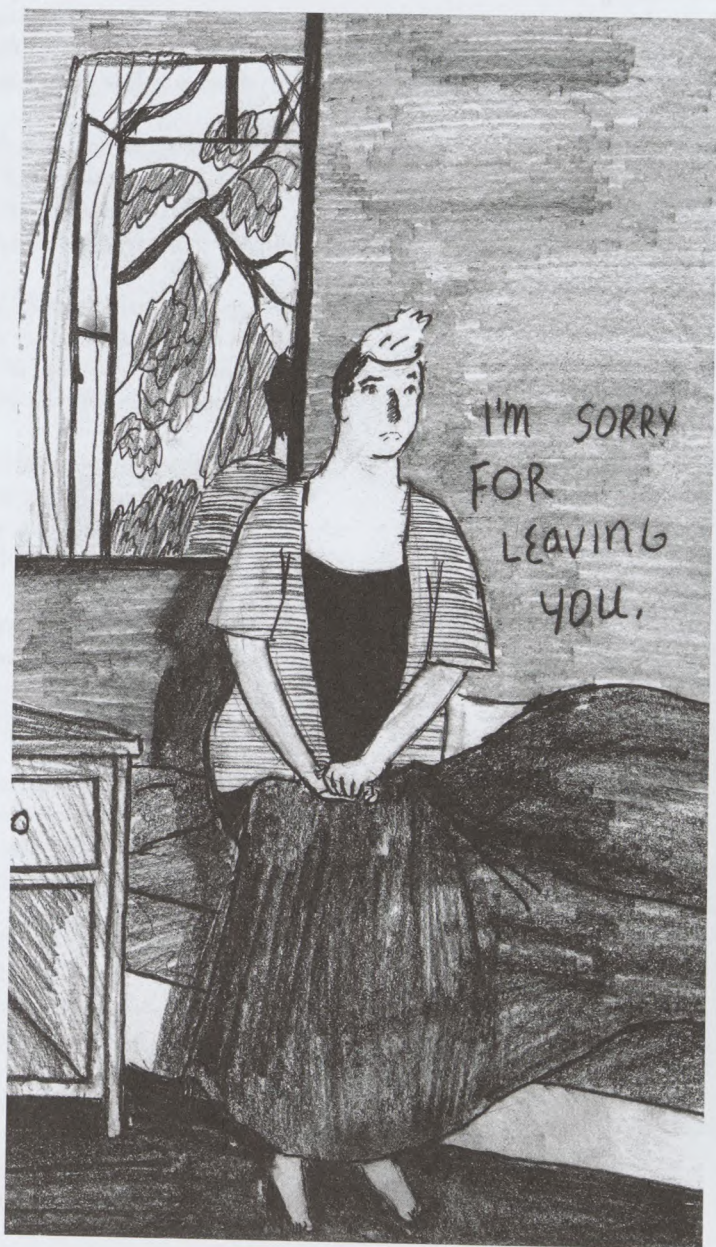
On the White House lawn.
"If I die, forget burial,
Just drop my body on the steps
Of the F.D.A." you said to me,

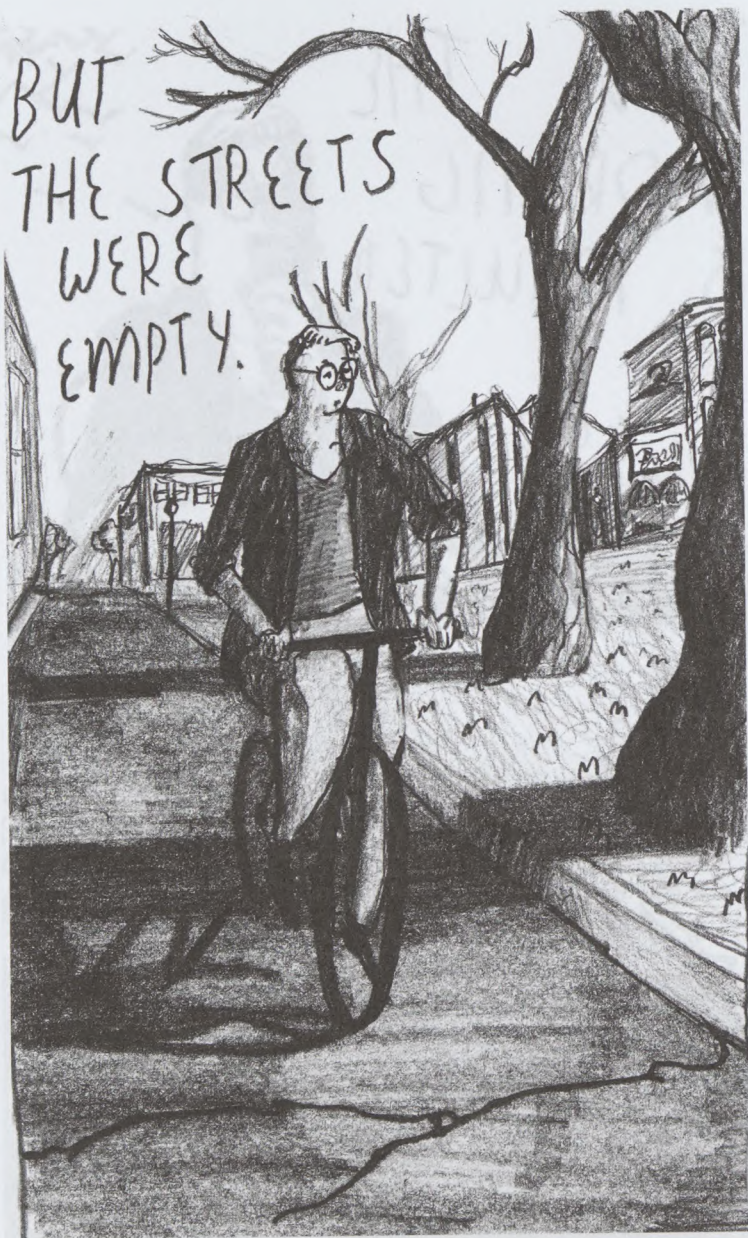
Just before we paid the pharmacist.
I brought flowers; I cut the stems,
Broke off the thorns for us to
Leave them, then, to dry.

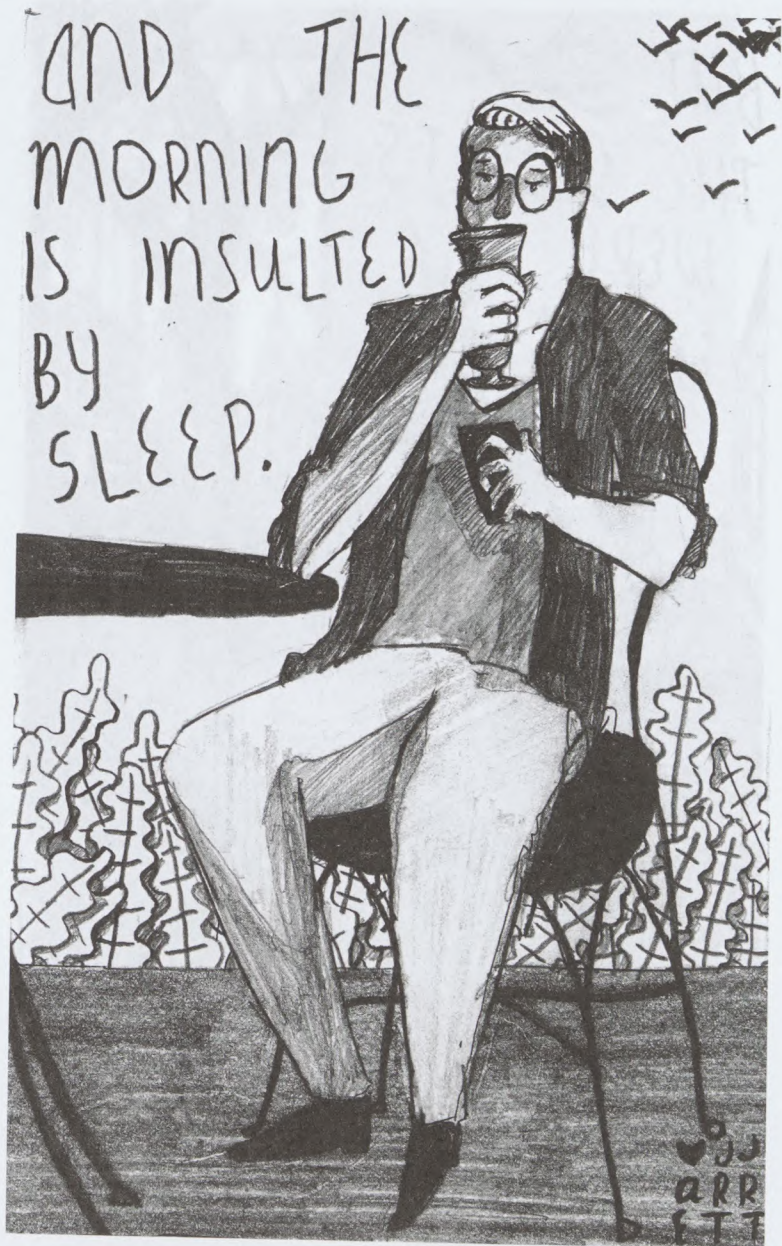
Saturn is devouring his son.
Goya is losing his sanity.
The advent of old age brings him fear.
Seventy-two years and war
have caused this romantic to go black.
He gazes into the eyes of Saturn.
Scraps of flesh fall like fresh bodies.
Each stroke of his brush frightens him.
Every detail is a sign of his decline.
Saturn wants to devour him
because this is what man comes from.
He fears his time is slipping away.
So he paints with a drive like the furies.
Saturn will consume him
but the black of his paintings live on.

ARDEN XVII

MORNING COMIC BY JOSHUA JARRETT







THE BRICK ROAD GREAR PRIZE FOR POETRY

ARDEN XVII

ROTTEN FRUIT BY HAYLEY MAINE

Rotted apples
Dead below trees
Wasted and spoiled
Decomposing
Worthless as you see
But we still breathe
Still swell and feed
Give help to bottom dwellers
Envy the prized ones
Worked for and picked
Effort put into them
What of us
The rotten bunch
Forgotten
Stomped over
Disrespected though elder
Our wormholes browning
As our skin wrinkles
Our flesh softened
Wasting away
Not a second glance spared
Our cores go bare
We are forgotten
Another rotten apple
Laid to rest.
The darkened skies rising
Our souls surging
We reach the golden gates
Released
Forgiven.

Superstructures of twisted pallets form
The city in which the wicked live.
Beer Warehouse becomes a broken world
Full of inebriated southern warriors
Bent on prospering the new Reich;
Purposing their pantarchy for us all,
So that we to might live by the new ways
When knowing we will die by the old ones.

These men, beer bellied and bullet bearing,
Have bastioned this city and its dwellers.
Flags wave in air that wafts the poisons
That bear the creeds of inbred soldiers,
Children cry in busted concrete streets
As parents devastated guts flow into gutters.
Books are burned like effigies as true knowledge
Falls away like glass from broken building's frames.

I see my father's America torn asunder;
My mother's tears fall into pools of blood
Spilled from gashes in siblings throats.
Democracy has died here, and now
Dip spit stains the bristle of carpets
Once pure white when freedom lived.
The literature teachings linger in my mind,
A marriage that must be torn down because

Wisdom is the greatest threat to evil.
For when the Stoics rise from athenaeums
The sinister ones will always subside,
Sprinting back to the gates of hell.
They have found me now crippled with rage.
The bullet pierces the muk covered face as I
Awake from my day dream to coworker taunts
"You will never be an author."

THE ORLENE JONES POULSEN AWARD FOR FICTION

ARDEN XVII

THANK YOU FOR THE PICTURES BY ELIM LEE

The shoebox says All-Stars across the side; the words now face the ceiling as the treasure has spilled. A bloody wine-colored shag rug placates the room of bland neutrals, and serves as an altar for the memories. There in the center of the room the peace offering stays, circled in a ring of snacks left. Sodas, chips, oyster crackers, cheese spray. Displaced casual, low-key fun.

They got mad. Accusatory statements flew without thought of consequence. Words attempted at kind consolation were taken with the wrong inclination. They all decided to be leaders, and forgot to take their turn as followers. We're all going our separate ways. So the one of us all, why not make it split? Each person torn out of the story, the photograph is now in pieces, with the white fringy tear framing each face. It's our own portrait of fame. As the capsule told us, we're all stars. Who could we ever be without each other?

Thank you for the eight of us happy. What could have possibly stayed. Arms are placed around waists, we stand in matrimonial friendship. Smiles played across the faces, yet eyes all averted. Some look at each other, faces half turned. Some look around, searching for a missing member. Some look at the camera with guards up, believing that the camera can flash to their memories, using the eyes as entrance. My friends, thank you for guarding your eyes. Thank you for giving me your burdens. Thank you for letting me hurt beyond the platonic love.

Thank you for the girl that doesn't smile. The girl that hurt vicariously. The girl that does not hope of love because she refuses to believe that something so frail can last. The girl that trusts only in the purest of all loves, the Figure on the Cross. Thank you for her faith on fire.

Thank you for the picture of us smiling. I remember that night, we stayed up so late. Just the girls, joking about our no-calorie pills, baking an entire pan of brownies for ourselves. Spraying whipped cream in shapes, on each other, straight into our mouths. Your mother was always the one to make us pose for her phone, for memories. I remember untying my hair, hurriedly preparing for a good enough capture. And now you can look at the snapshot. You are all laughing at me, and I am laughing along, my hair tangled in a mess; I still find myself beautiful because I am happy.

Thank you for the boy that talks. The boy that can be so devoted to people that don't want him. The boy that doesn't somber even his anger and speaks everything that comes to mind. The boy that prides what people hate. Thank you for his patriotic perseverance.

Thank you for the girl that smirks. The girl that knows more than what she sees. The girl that has the power to forget by simply making fun. The girl that can imitate everything, but leaves untouched what she has forgotten. Thank you for her spiteful sincerity.

There's another one. Its corner is edging its way past others with slightly thicker white frames. It's glossy coat shines with a sound that I can visualize, the creaky

scratch of the tacky, cheap photo booth film strips, complete with a one-sided perforation border. There we are, you and me. Emotions summed by pictures. The camera first displays an unattractive close-up of my eyes and nose. "Wait, how does this thing work?" Then we talk to each other, mouths blurred. "What face should we make?" Then are the laughs, mouths captured wide open, eyes closed, as we notice the clicks and flashes have been indicators of snapshots. "Oh my gosh!" And lastly, there's the sweet smile, the one illustration that saved the film belt from becoming scrapped. We looked so natural and young, pure and memorable. A perfect etch of our friendship.

Thank you for the boy who fidgets. The boy that is nervous for what everyone might think of him, yet still refuses to change for anyone. The boy that is so stunningly obedient it's hard to see what he really thinks. The boy that feels too much over trivial things, yet hides his sorrows over emotional demands. Thank you for his sweet integrity.

Thank you for the boy that laughs. The boy that manages to find comedy in everything, even things repulsive. The boy that is comfortable in any situation, as he simply chuckles his way out of it. The boy that has a tendency to be free of any serious effects of tragedy, as a voluntary ignorance of distress is far more appealing than the oversensitivity to anything that requires penetrating empathy. Thank you for the happiness he gave. Here's a cute one.

A 4 x 6, dusted with stale bread crumbs and pocked with a smidgen of a cheese fingerprint. There's you, him, and the talker. I lean in to kiss the lens, and we all strike sorority girl poses. You widen your eyes and drop your jaw like a half-faced puppet. He presses his lips together and diverts his eyes, holding back laughter at our awkward absurdity. The army brat turns his face to the sky, open smile like a child waiting for raindrops, and snaps his fingers at the end of an outstretched hand. You boys were more than brothers. We could exchange an "I love you" without batting an eye, whether in sincerity or in satire. Where will those playful instants we enjoyed together go? Who else is going to talk to me and comfort the anxiety in my chest? Who do I get to exchange hilarious banter with, arguments about whose flaws are the worst?

There is a break, a sudden realization. I am *mad*. I am reminiscing, already thinking in past tense, a silent and scary confession that none of this will continue to exist. Have I already given up? I'm putting my future in front of my friends, and I'm the one leaving. I am mad, yet they are the ones deserving to be infuriated. We're all mad. At me.

In egotistical frustration, I kick the shoebox. Moments fly around the room. And for the slightest moment as I stretch reality into imagination, the depictions of us turn into depictions of my choices. Behind my eyes a whirlwind visualizes of what I could do wrong, and what I could do right. But selfishness has always been my cursed virtue. I know that I love them... But already I know that I will go down

the path most beneficial. Emotions will not be considered in the tally. Besides myself and those I love, who else am I betraying?

Thank you for the girl that raises her eyebrows. Stubborn to a humorous perfection, and even wittier to distract. There has always been a mutual jealousy that drew us closer, a parallel we've experienced from our years together. Thank you for her complement to my faults, her ability to draw out my insecurities. She has been the one that knew me from the start; she stuck beside me through all my numerous transformations. Thank you for her eternal companionship.

Then there's the boy. The last one that I never really knew. His face was the one next to mine, and a slice of his cheek can be seen in my decapitated headshot that he ripped from the one of us all together. Thank you for the boy that was dark. The boy that could never quite quit his scarred façade, yet opened up numerous false chasms trying to find how to let go. I started out scared, I kept my distance. Then I lost my pity and patience as I forgot to figure out who he really was. For that I am sorry. Thank you for him. The boy I never really knew.

One last enjoyment. The last picture you ruined. The lights are dark, but the flash provides a sense of fame to that night. Our adrenaline was pouring rivers. We won. First place. The committee's fault for adding wild kids to a dance floor. The eight girls and guys, all mixed with other persons we failed to collect the names of. Our arms are thrown up, hands clasped, hips juttied. Having the time of our lives. Hearts thumping to the electronic beat of the pulsing music. Jumping like crazed jitters in a shaken can. But you were withdrawn. The girls weren't allowed to have fun. Too pretty, but too reckless. We're big girls, we rolled our eyes at you. But you meant well. Ha. Yay. I'm pretty.

But pretty doesn't last. Fun fades away. And you know what else ends? Friendship. Friendship! Pictures last, though, don't they? Pictures don't change, even when everything else does.

I kneel down and crawl around, embodying a self-centered human vacuum hungry for the times I'm about to steal. With careful consideration, there are long pauses as I look at each image before stacking them in tedious order within the flimsy cardboard box. Each idea a missing piece that all add up to a puzzle that never quit. The lid fits on with hands that can't be mine. They don't tremble. The hands are completely still and void. No part of this person has emotion.

Calculated and removed, with drawn back shoulders and mechanical steps, I walk until my eyes suddenly see a sunlit perspective. Squinting outside, past the back door. They are all there. Backs to me, positioned on the slide, the rock wall, the swing, the balance beam roof. I say it with no preparation.

"Thank you for the pictures." ... And then I left.

Because goodbyes are too hard. And my heart is too soft. I will spend the rest of my life wondering if it was the other way around. Maybe my last act was as far from altruistic as I wanted to be. But this way, I can still believe that they will live

forever by the swing set. Behind my neighbor's house are the companions I haven't lost. No matter how far I travel, they will still be waiting for me. If I ever forget, I just look at the pictures. The All-Star shoebox. Sitting in my lone apartment, on the top shelf of the miniscule closet. The only color left in my world.

The blinking green light across the room should have been hypnotic. Focusing on it, the constant flare of color illuminating the area around her phone, should have lulled Josephina to sleep. But she sweated under her five blankets and tapped her fingers against her clothed thigh in a frantic rhythm. She itched with a need to make herself more comfortable. The navy sweatpants she'd tugged on before slipping into bed were too snug around her hips and too warm under the excess of blankets. One of the heavy throws on top was slipping off the bed and threatened to take the bulk of her blankets with it.

If she moved to correct any of these discomforts though, she would look at the clock, at the blinking light, and there would be no stopping the progression of thoughts. She would think of unanswered text messages. She would think of skipping dinner and movies with friends. She would think of the feeling in her gut, sick and squirming low in her belly, keeping her anchored in the four walls of her room. She might even get up, pad over the cold wooden floor, to her desk.

She didn't want that, so she closed her eyes to the blinking light. The slight wobble of the fan, spinning on medium speed, caught her attention now.

He hadn't touched her.

She exhaled, flipped onto her side. With her eyes still closed, she reached out her hand and rested her palm flat on the cold wall. Even in the dark, she knew the spot where she had chipped away the glossy paint in a similar fit of anxiousness. The spot was rough and chalky to the touch and immediately made her feel dirty. Josephina dragged her hand back under the blankets, rubbed it on the sheets to warm it again.

"I need to wash my sheets," she said to the swirling air, thinking of the residue spreading onto the blankets from her hands. Her skin started to itch. The words seemed to echo loud above the whirl of the fan.

He hadn't touched her.

Josephina tried to be reassured, waited for the tension to go out of her arms, her legs, her stomach. All so warm under the layers of blankets and clothes. Protected. The itch started to burn, burn and spread, blooming on the skin of her shoulders, and she rubbed at it roughly with the pads of her fingers. When that didn't alleviate the feeling, she started scratching. She scratched until the skin was so hot she didn't feel anything but the burn. Then, she stopped.

The blue paint of the car he'd leaned out of was chipped, too, like the paint of her bedroom walls. The uneven edges had been ringed with burnt orange rust. Burnt orange was the only kind of orange Josephina could tolerate. She had tolerated him, too. Him in the blue car with chipped paint crawling next to her, tires rolling over the acorns in the street. The pressure cracked open their shells, mashing their bright orange insides into the asphalt.

While they leered, she stared at the orange. Orange rust and the orange insides of acorns. Josephina kept walking, crushing some acorns beneath her own feet. Beneath her running shoes. She kept peeking up, fixing her gaze on the American flag, torn along the forth stripe, with its loose strings hanging limp in the still air. It was five houses down, two across.

He hadn't touched her.

The violation was the suggestion of touch, his over eagerness meeting her anxiety, four houses down, two across. Even from the sidewalk, she knew the sound of automatic car locks. Unlocking or locking, she sped her steps, crushing orange into the sidewalk. The men in the car laughed, teased that she was running away. She was. Her heart drummed, warning her to further alertness, but something inside was freezing like an overworked computer. Her breathing stuttered. Josephina wondered if they took all the oxygen into themselves, leaving nothing for her.

She slid up the mountain of pillows at the head of her bed, propping herself up. Something in her stomach seemed to be slithering in sick, drunk circles still. Her arm itched, and the blanket had slid further down, uncovering one of her feet. Josephina scratched and tucked her feet back under the warmth of the blankets. Her phone let out three low beeps across the room, light still blinking its slow, steady green. Low battery.

THE PAUL HACKETT AWARD FOR CREATIVE NONFICTION

Mother. Did you know?

I knew this was high school. And I knew this was a new school. Before the light-filled

apple dropped in Times Square, New York, I asked you with plagues of doubt if you would give me money were I to fix my body.

To be honest, I don't think you understood the hate that would fill me when you said yes.

We settled on a lump sum of two hundred dollars for me to dump these twenty pounds.

There was so much that I started with: cutting this, cutting those, slowly cutting the skin off of my frame so that I could re-stitch an ideal body.

But Mother, did you know?

You once told me I was fat. You once told me I was ugly. You don't remember, because to you they were just insignificant pieces in your repertoire of blunt remarks. To me, they were a little deeper. A snag on my self-esteem with a jagged piece of demolition that started to fester into a deeper rot of hate.

Mother, did you know that my friends noticed?

I ate lunch with boys that would retort when I proudly showcased the lowest weight at the table.

"That's because you starve yourself."

They gorged themselves on the glops of meatloaf and microwaved shepherd's pie so graciously gifted by the smiling hairnet ladies, and I nibbled timidly at the sandwich bags I had packed in my purse the night before. Mother, did you know that though there may be thirty-five calories in those plentiful stalks of asparagus, a cup of ranch has seventy?

Mother, did you know that it has not been easy to forget the strictured units of energy in each piece of food?

Father asked me why I weighed my food obsessively, you asked me why I stood naked

on the scale. But all I saw was this one digit resting on its throne a bit north of my feet, that wouldn't go down. That was just one more day of hating myself.

Mother, did you know?

I sat in class next to girls whose legs I can see through, and, distracted by the double

vision, I forget to not answer when people ponder on how you could possibly know how many calories were in a carrot. Why would you care, how can you even know how to care? There's thirty-five per average seven inches long, three-fourth inch wide root.

Others don't know this, do they?

Mother, did you know why I turned my mirror around in my room?

My door was closed so much of the time. You wouldn't be able to notice the times I cried over my Bible, trying to tell my mind that God created us all in his image. Trying to tell myself that Eve was stunningly beautiful as mere words on the pages of creation. But everyone else - the girls in vivid, detailed image, the ones in shrouds of jealousy, lifted up on thrones of envy in the world I see around me - well, it is clear what they look like.

Mother, did you know how comforting the smoothness of bones can be?

There has always been pride in being able to see and feel the contours of your skeletal parts. Because there is a new person coming up to the surface of your being. There is a newness to the coldness of the chilling cage that becomes uncovered. It is romantic with its whispers of insistence, telling me that they still want more, they want the silhouette of their beautiful, ghostly curves to be silkily closeted by only a mere velvet of skin.

Mother, did you know that your family can be mean?

I went to visit your family overseas. The culture visibly allows the ostracizing of girls

that are not stick-thin, doesn't it? I came back with the ready excuse that I had gotten fat, with the eager apology that I would soon lose it. I told my stomach that the movies on the plane were so intriguing, and that is why it was only allowed the snack and no meals.

Mother, did you know what I saw in my reflection, and why I did what I did to fix it?

I dreaded taking pictures. I must kiss the camera, or I must lean forward with a gasping smile. One will suck in my chubby cheeks and fake factual cheekbones. One will elongate the folds on the sides of my neck to promote the nubs of bone my eyes rest on. Otherwise, I saw a face far too fat to be pretty. In the mirror, the swollen state of my legs alarmed me. Positioning my feet to adapt the disfigured stance of a pigeon, and sucking my stomach in and up so it could be flat, I persevered in finding the elusive angles that would disguise these lingering flaws.

Mother, did you know how easy it was for the hate of myself to invade my health?

There was no patience once I perpetuated myself on the path of self-demolition. There was suddenly no goal I could stop at because what my mind tells me to achieve always lied ever just ahead. The thought of suicide only crossed my mind once, but not as if I were to commit the act. I finally understood why others would. It would seem nothing superficial matters in the haze of death. Desperation blinded my sense. I would covet the privilege of hospitalized anorexic girls. That they were encouraged to eat so much because they needed to gain weight.

I wanted to reach that point. Thank God you stopped me.

Mother, did you know that you would be one to bring me back after throwing me so far out?

Nothing made me love myself more than when someone told me I looked thinner. But not thinner. Better. The word that society has determined and used to mandate the holiness of the ritual of a diet. Weight loss. The methods that work are worshipped, but this industry pays no attention to the naivety of little girls that they destroy. Didn't you and Dad say you were so proud of my current "shape?" What then, were you before?

But you were also the one I called first when I couldn't stop crying after watching that video. Mr. Professor explained what body dysmorphic disorder was. You soothed me down; you watched the video; you didn't believe I was afflicted. Mother, do you remember when I finally let you in?

Me yelling my confusion at you. I had stumbled through the mass of tangled emotions in my head to try to reach a translation that you could see. There are not voices in my head, there is only me. There is a me that is ravenous for the thinness I know how to attain, and there is a me that sours with guilt at each enormous bite I steal, and there is a hateful me whenever I can't stop eating. There is a me that rebukes my hunger as I go to sleep, saying good job. There is a me that runs my hands over my body, searching desperately for the bones that signal the thinness I need.

And there is a me that believes every mirror. But every mirror runs on a different commute. One tells me I'm fat, one tell me I'm thin. No matter which one I believe, they will all concur on the fact that I am, the moment I eat, not skinny enough.

Mother, do you understand?

My pause at the point I tell you all. The soothing of your words washed over me in compensation; they were the apology that forgave any degradation you had ever caused me.

Your prayers awakened a sense of spiritual rest that I had given up looking for. Your calm commanded my torrents to peace. You perfected the ratio of listening and caring in response to every breakdown, you nodded with the embodiment of armor as I painted each spiel with tears. You never had to hug me, because your compassion that I could finally see in your persistence for my happiness was an embrace enough.

Mother, do you know it takes time for a body to heal?

I see the pounds of fat collecting on places that once used to be relievingly dented and shallow. A deprived body is greedy when nutritional excess is received; it will store it in preparation for the period of starvation surely coming. My eyes look at this consistently swelling body, and I am disgusted. I admonish my past self

for ever letting go. I know how beautiful that skinniness felt as I carried it around. But then, I remind myself to accept the process. To put a stubborn procrastination on panic, to beat down the thoughts that remind me how appealing it would be to skip dinner. I am healing. I am winning.

Mother, did you know a mind will never completely heal?

I will simply continue to conquer my daily demons.

Mother, I know this.

But I see girls shrinking.

I wouldn't know to look for it until I had endeavored for it myself.

I see the skeptical glares at cafeteria plates, the tight notches of belts they command their waists to pinch. I can single out the one girl in the group that laughs more unsteadily, running

constant comparisons of body, shape, and size. I hear the enforcement of laughter strengthened as they challenge you to believe their appearance is purely coincidental.

It pains me. That those pieces of the cake stay waiting to be taken, eaten on the antidote path to a once again joyful girl. I want to tell them my victory, my freedom. My plunder of strength. I want to tell them to stop being afraid. Because, mother, did you know?

My story could be anyones.

ARDEN XVII

MOTHERLAND BY ALLYSSA HUDSON

1

I've made homes in moldy trailers, in lakeside houses, in beachside condos. I've made homes in giant mud puddles with tadpoles, in the shallows of lakes with minnows, in garden sheds with cats. It's pressure in my chest, released in laughter, tumbling out as I skip through the slick grass in the rain with my mother. It's the warmth of fire crackling in the fireplace, lulling me to sleep on the carpet facing the flames. Home is the feel of porcelain in my hand, the smell of the loose tea and herbs and dried fruits packed into a mesh strainer. The flavor seeps into water, mixes with honey and candied ginger, turning the water red-brown. The smell of the ginger rises up to my nose along with a plume of steam out of the smooth white cup, and there it is.

2

When I talk home, I should start at red Georgia clay. It seeps into white socks better than any dye and folds itself into the depressions of my father's tires. Home comes with a two-door Ford truck, purple like the eggplant my mother slices thin, batters, and fries. That truck zips down red, unpaved roads to my grandmother's house. Grandma's and homemade banana pudding and pecans fresh out of the shell and tiny homegrown strawberries.

Physically I start in a sterile hospital, New Years Eve. A beginning with a start-up package: tiny mobile home, dinky silver car, new pale-blue car seat. My family upgrades slowly. We get the purple Ford, the sprawling stretch of hilly land between two lakes. The most important starts surround family. I remember the settings of my early memories, those homes. My grandmother's front porch with its chipped blue paint and well-worn rocking chairs. The cinderblock steps shift under my weight as I go to open the screen door. Home is the spacious living room of my childhood home where I opened up my single Christmas present during a hard year. The carpet was matted and brown, but my father sat with me amongst the wrapping paper. I hosted a tea party there with my new plastic tea set, its pink plates and blue cups, and it was perfect.

3

When I talk home, I should start at Cebu. I started there, a clump of cells in a brown body. My mother carried me around the dirt streets, surrounded me while we slept between bamboo walls, and I absorbed the fish, rice, and pork skins she ate. When she dumped buckets of cold water over her naked body, soaped herself down, I was there. I was there seven months. I was an hour away from the sea where my uncles disappeared into the waves with huge nets, then reappeared, dragging the bulging, wet weight through the damp sand. I was near the river where my mother washed clothes, trapped river crabs, caught tilapia, where she

learned my favorite childhood song: *Tong tong tong tong, pakitong-kitong alimango sa suba. Gibantog nga di-makuha. Ako ra'y nakakuha. Ako ra'y nakasuwa. Tong tong tong tong.* I was there with street vendors pouring sodas into sandwich bags for the children, with the grandmothers spinning out homemade caramel, with the neighbors who told my mother her American husband was never going to send for her. I was there in the city where my mother learned English in movie theaters showing American movies. I was there in the city where she skipped school to go to the sugar cane fields to peel the stalk, slice off a piece, chew the flesh to get at the juices. I was there inhaling shell-dust through my mother as the women drilled holes into tiny shells, feet shoving their wheels to keep the drills going. The shells were collected from the coasts, threaded with clear fishing line by dark hands. The finished strands of souvenir necklaces and bracelets, already crumbling and dry, went to America to hang in souvenir shops along its coasts. My mother boarded a plane after a wedding, after seven months of pregnancy, and went there, too.

4

We think in addresses and street names and neighborhoods and cities, and I can offer those. Acres of Shade, Lakeshore, Delray. Those spaces mean something. I get upset at the thought of Lakeshore, where I grew up, the grass up past my head now, the fence torn down by the neighbors, the mobile home falling to pieces. The windows are all busted out, the porch's brown paint peels and its wood rots. Wild dogs root through our sheds. The rose bush beside my old bedroom is dead, and sweet gum balls blanket the backyard, make it impossible to walk without falling. Home is an address and a street name and neighborhood and a city, but I also carry it with me. It springs up around my feet wherever I plant them.

5

Memory doesn't start at a place. It doesn't start anywhere. It bleeds backwards and forwards. Memories ooze out in all directions, and I've snatched at their edges, to shape their flow, but they seep past the space between my fingers. I want memories to come to me like a movie; I want to search through the couch cushions for the remote and hit rewind or replay or eject. Sometimes I want to see the movie again and again, and sometimes it's best if we just toss it into a Goodwill donation bin and forget about it. Hope we never see it again, there on the shelves, while we're browsing.

6

Tong tong tong tong pakitong-kitong. The homeland skitters out of reach like a crab dashing back into the sea. I'm the only one who can catch it. I'm the only one who can taste it.

7

My tongue was the only part of me that could touch the Motherland. The taste of

bibingka, cooked in banana leaf shells singed around the edges. Sometimes siopao, the glossy meat bun stuffed with pork, green onion, and sweet orange chili sauce. Or, if the prices were right and the craving strong enough, a mixture of coconut milk, grated cassava root, sugar, young coconut, rolled into a banana leaf and steamed till it all held together. Peel open the soft leaf and pull off pieces with my fingers. My flesh turned red from the heat, and the pieces slid down my throat, hot.

8

My tongue has touched my father's land, too. Heavy southern foods made from scratch, foods of Hudson family tradition. Homemade blackberry jam. Crisp, fried chicken oozing grease. Slow-cooked collard greens with chunks of fatty pork. Thick slices of ham slathered with pineapple glaze. Banana pudding with whipped-cream peaks higher than the steeple of the family's Baptist church. And buttermilk biscuits cut by my grandmother's hands. The stomach's a greedy thing.

9

Does home start at conception or sixteen weeks post-conception or twenty weeks or twenty-four? Or are we somehow homeless in the womb?

10

The other Filipino children tell me I'm not real like them. They run their dark hands over my thin, brown hair, inherited from my father, and tell me it's proof I'm not one of them. Filipino women pinch my round cheeks with thin fingers and tell me that I have my father's face. I consider ways to cut the whiteness out of me so that I don't have to feel guilty for the need to claim their home as mine.

11

My mother curls around the phone as she gets the news. I hug her brown knees while she cries into the receiver, and I rub my fingers over the white patches on her legs where she'd burned herself with her mother's iron. Grandmother is dead. The sunroom of our trailer leaks, and some tiny mushrooms have come up in the night. They smell like earth, and I leave her to pry apart their domed heads, uncomfortable with her grief. Their fibers separate, little threads, and I line them up on the molded blue and grey carpet. I'd never met my grandmother, but the island orbits around her. In motherland myth, she was the great mother. She held them all together: my mother, my uncles, my grandfather. She handled finances, made sure the family ate, made sure her only living daughter, my mother, wasn't misled in love. When she'd call once a month she'd ask about all the grandchildren, ask my mother about me, pronouncing my name wrong. When mother spoke to grandmother, I'd rest my head on her folded legs, absorbing the murmured sounds coming out of the phone and my mother's Tagalog. Grandmother's death means the end of this ritual. It means a return to where I was conceived.

12

I sleep beneath mesh netting in the bamboo house. Bugs perch on the outside of the

netted drape wings beating in the dim light. The adults coo over me, grip me by the shoulders and stare into my face, smiling, and tell me I look like my mother. They prod the tip of my wide nose, the nose my mother wanted to be slimmer, more elegant. I run with the children in the neighborhood, feet kicking up the dirt, and forget about language. I don't remember my grandmother's funeral. Instead there's the sea, the vision of my uncles diving in with their nets for fresh seafood. There's the sensation of bathing outside with other children, plastic buckets full of cold, soapy water. There's the sharp twinge of pain, falling and scraping my legs, the sting of iodine on bloody skin. The smell of the fish market with its open stalls, the taste of boiled chicken and rice, the packed roadways. The baskets of laundry rested on the flesh of the women's shoulders. The bumps and sharp turns of the tricycles, zipping between the houses, around people and loose animals.

13

I'm seven, and I don't want to eat their food. I disappoint myself. I know there's something wrong with having a fear of eating things that aren't packaged with printed labels that tell me everything that's inside. There's something wrong with finding comfort in the cold, machine touch, finding comfort in knowledge of a conveyor belt dropping thousands of identical objects into boxes. We walk to the market, and it's not like the States. The trip takes three times as long because the trip itself has personality. We stop along the way to talk to relatives, to friends, to friends of friends who've heard my mother's returned with her daughter. I listen to their compliments, their questions, all in a mix of English and Tagalog. I am never bored waiting to move onward to the market. Everything is new and interesting, imprinting on me, and though I drink in the sights of all the interesting foods—halo-halo, lechon kawali, pancit palabok—stacked and piled high in the wooden stalls, I can't find a place to put them inside of me. I eat boiled chicken and rice instead of fish, and my dislike of fish, the lifeblood of the islands and of my mother's people, separates me.

14

The brown in me sets me in a limbo of Asian stereotypes, and its combination with white leaves me unable to bubble the "right" ethnicity on standardized tests. As I grow at Lakeside, I gather up all the conflicting nicknames—cracker, gook, chink—and cradle them in my hands. They squirm in my palms, little tadpoles, confused, alive, without a resting place.

15

My uncles handed over my mother's money on All Souls Day so that the graves of their parents would be cared for, and I imagine that the gravekeepers' children sigh in disappointment each year. If the family doesn't pay, the bones are cleared out to make room for someone who can. The cemetery children play with them and

the dogs, with their ribs straining against their bodies. The bones mingle together, singing when they touch. Like home, they go where the living take them.

16

The language lining your mouth is home. My mother offers to teach me her language when I'm twenty, but it should already be mine. I'm angry because it's not. The letter combinations don't leave my mouth right, and there are some sounds that don't register in my ears. Language should fill that slot where inadequacy's settled in. Inadequacy settled in the guts, and I stand in front of the mirror, frowning at the dipping curves of my stomach over my pajama pants. If I could fix that, I might not feel so bad that my tongue can't form my mother's words.

17

A woman I consider a friend asks, "Where do you come from?" She asks even though I've tracked dirt through her homes for eight years. She asks like she doesn't know. She asks like the curious men and women I sometimes meet in grocery stores, eyes trailing over my darker complexion and ambiguous facial features that don't pinpoint origin.

I say Columbus, thinking of the Medical Center where I was born.

She looks unsatisfied and tries again. *No, where did you come from?* I dig my fingers into the cream carpet, swallowing Columbus. I regurgitate it back up, say it again. No, where do you come from? The emphasis hops from word to word, and I know what she means. She means to ask what place brought color to my skin, what place tainted my southern whiteness.

But I don't know how the sky looks before a hurricane. I don't know how to hail a Jeepney. I don't know the taste of Balut. I don't know the weight of pesos in my hand. I don't know who the president of the Philippines is. I don't know any of the islands' dialects. I don't know the national anthem. I don't know how to build a bamboo house. I don't know how fresh Tamarind smells. I don't know what I need to wash clothes in the river. I don't know how the school system in Cebu works. I know Eartha Kitt's "Waray Waray." I know the sounds of the Tinikling dance, the rhythmic click of bamboo poles and the slaps of bare feet hitting the floor. I know the story of Aponibolinayen and her husband and her son; the vine besides her home quivers and dies when her husband perishes in pursuit of those sweet fruit, biyo. I know home isn't fixed for me. I can learn from my mother about Motherland. I can learn for myself. I can learn the language, history, food, trivia. I can go there. I can make it a part of me if I try harder. I just wish it had never come to this. I wish it were a natural part of me that I didn't have to force. I wish I'd started with a home inside of me that was a mirror of my physical self: half-Motherland and half-Fatherland. I was given over to the Fatherland with only whispers of the other, just a taste.

18

I answer, "My mom's from the Philippines." It satisfies her.

NAARTJIE MULTIMEDIA AWARD FOR EXPOSITORY WRITING

Mark Doty can be called a gay poet. It is not difficult to find the themes of sexuality throughout his nearly dozen books of poetry. Stories of his lover's battle with HIV / AIDS and his eventual death spread over multiple volumes, permeating the verse like a virus of its own – or a scar – that has no cure. For Doty, though, the experience of such powerful loss becomes something more than a morose obsession. Recipient of several awards for his writing, Doty has proven himself as a master of language, but also the ability to create a metamorphosis within his work. He draws inspiration from the inevitable burning of the Library of Alexandria, the sinking and disappearance of Atlantis, and the fantastic birth of a phoenix out of fire to inspire his books of poetry, and each poem finds some sense of commonality with these images of brilliant transformation.

Doty's belief in transformation harkens back to childhood. In *Firebird*, Doty's memoir of his childhood, he describes his first encounter with the "wrappings and presentation and display" of beauty in the mementos of his sister's cotillion society, hidden in her bottom drawer and kept secret from her preschool brother (*Firebird* 14). This is Doty's first experience with the trappings of beauty and the act of transformation from one thing (his sister) to another (a beautiful Rainbow Girl), but it is followed shortly in his life by a stronger lesson in the power of the aesthetic. In school, he attends an assembly visited by Little Miss Sunbeam – a young girl dressed in the costume of the bread mascot – and he observes her become more than her persona through her performance. She dances, and Doty describes it as "a faultlessly executed performance of who she's labored so to become, any sign of her work subsumed in the bravura of her art" (*Firebird* 19). Though this moment is just one of many, it seems a groundwork for Doty's understanding and appreciation of poetry. "Anything dinged, busted or dumped / can be beaten till it sings" he writes in his poem "Tunnel Music" (ll 17-18). Here is the proclamation of the transformative nature of poetry, recognizing that the corporate mascot may create beautiful art through a labor of becoming, or that there may be beauty taken out of the most terrible situations.

Doty's style is aware of itself and the themes he explores. He writes almost exclusively in free verse with no rhyme and no consistent rhythm, instead breaking his lines where they seem most fit to break, and organizing them into small stanzas of two, three, or four lines. The length of the stanza may even change throughout the poem, but the focus is on the language contained within the structure of a poem. In his recent poem, "Apparition (Favorite Poem)" from *Fire to Fire*, Doty shows great respect for the formalists that came before him while also recognizing that their time is in the past. "The old words are dying," the poem begins so assertively, referring to the poetry of the Romantics, the Victorians, and perhaps even the Modernists, with one broad and powerful statement (l. 1). The speaker continues to assure the reader that "everyone forgets them, / pages falling into

sleep and dust," as the formalist style that Doty rejects with his writing has become antiquated (ll 2-3).

Despite this rather fatalistic approach, Doty, as always, remains optimistic: "burning so slowly / you wouldn't even know there's a fire," ends the second stanza as the poem begins a transition, exploring the fire of poetry as it transforms a young boy's life (ll. 5-6). The words are aged to the point of death, but there is still a fire in them which can be grasped by a teenager born over a century since the words were penned. This teenager is reciting a formal sonnet at a bookstore, "repeating a crucial instruction" (l. 19) with his reading. What makes this instruction so crucial? The "instruction" is simply to *remember*, as this teenager is reciting the famous sonnet of caution and despair, "Ozymandias" by Percy Shelley. The sonnet is cited directly, as the last two lines of "Apparition (Favorite Poem)" are the first two lines of "Ozymandias." This, too, is a sort of transformation, as Doty's poem becomes Shelley's, and the end of one thing is the beginning of another.

Doty often turned to poetry as a release, looking for a way to make sense of the tragedy of life. "Where there are no words," Doty writes in his introduction to *The Best American Poetry 2012*, "poetry springs into being" (pg xviii). His third collection of poetry, *My Alexandria*, seems to be the exemplar of this theme. Written shortly before the death of his lover, Wally, from AIDS, the poems are filled with confusion, fear, and sometimes wonder. In "Broadway," Doty presents a speaker that is wandering with some confusion under Grand Central, coming across a woman in need named "Carlotta." This woman "was only asking for change," but the speaker reached out towards her and remarks "I don't know why I took her hand" (ll. 22-23). The speaker, like Doty may have felt, was looking for comfort and understanding from a stranger, like a reader. Instead of simply giving the stranger what she wanted, the speaker decided to attempt a connection. He was not disappointed. The speaker describes the sensation as "like touching myself, / the way your own hand feels when you hold it / because you want to feel contained" (ll. 50-53). Out of almost nothing – a brief moment of interaction – understanding sprang forth, transforming this interaction with a common street beggar into a real understanding of what "change" can mean in its many connotations. Carlotta responds to the speaker only by saying "You get home safe now, you hear?" (l. 54) as they part, reversing this relationship of power (the beggar to the begged) between the two. It is now Carlotta who sees the suffering in the speaker, as the speaker saw some need for change in Carlotta. In a stranger's suffering, the speaker found compassion and solidarity and a reflection of his own suffering.

The fear of the unknown, the loss of connection, and death all provide fuel for Doty's transformations. In *My Alexandria*, Doty shares a story about a turtle, which revisits, in spirit, his titular poem from *Turtle, Swan*. In "No," Doty's turtle is godlike: he "makes night / anytime he wants" and "feels at the center of every-

thing" (ll. 15-17). This turtle's "prayer" is "the single word of his shell, / which is no" (ll. 32-33) and to Doty that "No" might come as a transformation from another turtle, one seen years before, that was full of fear and mortality. In "Turtle, Swan," published originally in the collection of the same name, Doty does not pay as much reverence to the reptile, instead using words such as "blunt" and "blocky" (ll. 31 & 25) to describe what later becomes a divine beast, and recalling its movement as that of a "missionary moving certainly / into the country of his hopes" (ll. 50-51). The turtle in "Turtle, Swan" responded to humanity just as the turtle of "No" did, with rejection, but in "Turtle, Swan" the turtle is snapping its beak and resisting the attempts of the speaker and his lover to save him from the highway street, not stoically hiding, and is eventually unable to resist the involvement of the outside world. It is transformed from the stubborn, vicious beast found on the highway to simply "remains of shell / in front of a little liquor store" (ll. 39-40).

What becomes then of the turtle is Doty's transformation of experience into artful descriptions. The turtle's shell had become "too small to be his" (l. 42) after the effects of "what the day's heat might have taken" from him (l. 43). For days, the beast transformed into "a stain, / a blotch that could have been merely / oil" (ll. 44-46). The shell was all that remained, empty and sick. Doty's transformation does not stop there as the poem shifts away from the turtle, but to another one. This turtle is human, as the speaker's lover has transformed metaphorically into the beast with the shell. In the small movie theatre they go to, the lover takes off his leather jacket, his shell, and leaves it "propped in the seat / that would be mine" for the speaker to find, but he does not see it (l. 67-68). The speaker references a book, *Stranger Than Science*, to describe the feeling he had of searching for his lover, who was "in the act of striding forward / to examine a flower, gone," transported away from this world, transformed into emptiness (ll. 62-63). Panicking, the speaker nearly cries, sitting alone for the previews, until he finally spots the empty shell, or jacket in this case, waiting for him. The lover continues to transform throughout the poem, and references to a transformation from healthy to wasting away are made by the speaker, implying that "some man's lover showing / the first symptoms" (ll. 71-72) might become his own lover soon. Doty references the "night sweat / or casual flu" (ll. 72-73) that is often the precursor to AIDS, and shares in a single line of poetry an image for the transformation – the slow burning death that consumes from the inside out – that AIDS brings to its victims clearly: he calls it "the disappearance a day at a time" (l. 74).

The speaker fears these transformations, and, as in "Broadway," the speaker becomes confused, even desperate for some reversal of fortune again. "I do not know," the speaker repeats at the beginnings of lines 75 and 76, about the turtle or the swan fleetingly seen at the start of the poem, and what they mean or "where these things we meet and know briefly, / as well as we can or they will let us, /

go" (ll. 77-80), but the speaker is not entirely without an understanding of his own needs, and for Doty these are also the needs of his reader. Doty focuses on the uncertainty of the situation in order to relate to the reader, much as the speaker of "Broadway" relates to Carlotta, and he ends the poem with an affirmation from the speaker: "I do not want you ever to die" (l. 84). This affirmation is directed towards the speaker's lover, but also the turtle and the swan, and perhaps every victim of the AIDS epidemic.

Doty, by the time *Turtle, Swan* is published, is already familiar with death. The AIDS epidemic is in full swing by the mid-eighties, and as a gay man in a big city, Doty had witnessed several deaths to the disease before his lover, Wally Roberts, died in 1994. The experience of gay men during this time was a dangerous one where death waited not only in the diseased blood of those you loved, but also in the fearful eyes of wild mobs looking to hide the threat of something different under blows from their fists. In "Charlie Howard's Descent," Doty explores the death of a gay man in a small town as he falls towards a river from a bridge. The theme of transformation occurs twice in this poem, once in lines 21-32, where the harsh words and jokes that Charlie Howard has had to suffer through are taken into himself. He has "made of them a place to live" (l. 22), assimilating the oppression and hate into his own identity and life. The word "faggot" becomes a "bed he slept in, hard / and white" (ll. 25-27), referencing the familiarity and omnipresent nature of the most commonly used slur against gay men, and the word "queer" is turned into "something sharp / but finally useful, a tool" (ll. 28-29), as the word has turned from a hateful slur similar to "faggot" into an identifying term that the gay culture uses to self identify. Charlie himself is transformed as he falls from the bridge to the river: "he transforms into grace" (l. 39) as Doty describes the fall. What does this transformation imply?

First, there is the sense of flight that a fall from such great heights allows. In his fall, described as a transformation "into grace" (l. 39), the speaker presents an image of Charlie Howard in flight, propelling himself into the water. Because of this willingness to fall and the assimilating of hate speech into his own self, the reader can be led to believe that perhaps Charlie Howard is *jumping* from this bridge. This is turned around, and the second understanding of "grace" is revealed, when the speaker mentions "the three teenage boys / who hurled him from the edge" (ll. 44-45). Charlie is not only a victim of hateful language, but also the transforming of language into something solid and real. The men revealed to have thrown him from the bridge are transformed as well from the murderous mob into "really boys now, afraid, / their fathers' cars shivering behind them" (ll. 46-47), confident enough to murder but not strong enough to accept the reality of their action. Doty does well to make reference to the "fathers' cars," simultaneously reminding us that these actions are performed by children as well as making a small

statement on the legacy of homophobia, as the fathers are figuratively the vehicles themselves of the oppression. Charlie climbs out of the water, according to the poem, transformed now into a ghost, and "blesses his killers / in the way that only the dead / can afford to forgive" (ll. 52-54), as the second meaning of grace is understood that in the fall from the bridge, Charlie made peace with his fate. He has made such a home inside himself for the hate and homophobia that even he cannot blame his killers, for how could they know that he was human enough to die.

Doty's belief about poetry as a system of transforming is often reflected in his work, specifically and simply worded in "Source," the title poem of another book of his poetry, that "the poem wants the impossible; / the poem wants a name for the kind of nothing / at the core of time" (ll. 56-58). For Doty, poetry seeks to capture this moment of birth and change as it is happening and not before or after it. He seeks to capture the burning of the phoenix in its last moments where the transformation is occurring even against, and because of, the desire for stability. Poetry itself, as seen in "Apparition (Favorite Poem)" is not immune to this death and rebirth. Despite capturing death, Doty has managed to provide in his poems a place for life to continue. His subjects become forever immortalized in graceful language and given, even if only for a few lines, life after death: the transformation of fire into ash and then, once more, into fire.

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